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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines embodied experience in Odissi, a classical Indian dance. In particular, it investigates how experiences of body, mind, identity and self are shaped by dance practices and discourses, and informed by values and meanings which are considered culturally specific. In order to achieve this goal, this research involves dance practitioners who both do and do not ascribe themselves to the cultural context with which the dance is associated. The purpose is to understand whether or not Odissi dancers share similar ways of making sense of their embodied experience, and to investigate the extent this shared embodied culture is shaped by training and performative practice.

This research focuses on the common aspects of dancers' embodied experience, at the same time discussing the tensions that characterise practices and discourses about dance. It especially examines how these tensions reflect relations of power based on gender, ethnicity and artistic expertise, and how aesthetic discourses and artistic practices are woven together with cultural ethics. In other words, this dissertation investigates on the one hand how cultural categories inform embodied experience, and on the other hand how dance practitioners 'inflect' these categories to make sense of their own experiences and to question the inclusion of certain subjects in the practice of dance.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>NOTES ON TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLITERATION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1. Research Topic</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2. Research Questions</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3. Conceptual Clarifications</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4. Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>15</b>
Phenomenological anthropology	15
Phenomenological approach in Music and Dance Studies	19
Embodied cognition: empirical studies and philosophical dialogues	21
South Asian Performing Arts Scholarship	24
<b>5. The Ethnographic Process</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>6. A Metaphor for Somatic Experience</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>7. The Embodied Self: Philosophical and Religious Readings</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>8. Structure of the Work</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>LAYER V: CONTEXTS</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Overview of the Chapter</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>1. The Research Context</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>2. Embodying Differences</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>3. Living In Context</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>4. The Stage and the Audience</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>5. Indian Classical Dance and Its Ideology</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>6. Looking for Evidence</b>	<b>89</b>

7. Transmitting the Dance	97
8. The Basic Dance Technique	100
9. Choreographic Elements	108
Conclusion	114
<b>LAYER IV: <i>IDENTITIES</i></b>	<b>117</b>
Overview of the Chapter	117
1. Performative Identities	118
2. Be(come)ing Odia	123
3. Gendering Dance, Troubling Identities	130
4. Domesticating the Female Energy	139
5. Poetics of Grace: Shame and Pride	144
6. Embodying Dependency	156
7. Experiences of Empowerment	160
Conclusion	167
<b>LAYER III: <i>BODIES</i></b>	<b>169</b>
Overview of the Chapter	169
1. Individual Bodies	170
2. From the Real to the Ideal	175
3. Drawing the Boundaries in Between	182
4. The 'Science' Behind the Movement	186
5. Mapping the Space Within	191
6. Porous Containers and Fluid Contents	202
7. Opening Boundaries, Tying Bonds	206
Conclusion	212
<b>LAYER II: <i>MINDS</i></b>	<b>214</b>
Overview of the Chapter	214

1. The Place of the Mind	215
2. Forms of Consciousness	223
3. Knowledge that Eschews Words	232
4. The Subject and the Object of the Dance	238
5. Wandering Thoughts and Automatic Movements	247
6. When Body and Mind are One	252
7. The Role of Music in Dance	261
Conclusion	271
<b>LAYER I: <i>SELVES</i></b>	<b>272</b>
Overview of the Chapter	272
1. Spiritual Experiences	273
2. Between Aesthetics and Spirituality	276
3. Extraordinary Acts	280
4. From Self-surrendering to Self-mastering	282
5. The Importance of Practice	286
6. The Refinement of the Self	291
7. Transparent Bodies	299
Conclusion	304
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>306</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>312</b>
Interviewees' Profile	312
Interview Questions	316
Glossary	318
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>322</b>

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: Ethnographic Field Notes	38
Fig. 2: Conceptual Map and Analysis of Ethnographic Data	43
Fig. 3: Sujata Mohapatra (on the left) Transferring Knowledge Through Touch to the Author (centre) (by Ignacio Moreno)	75
Fig. 4: Sujata Mohapatra Transferring Knowledge Through Touch (by Ignacio Moreno)	75
Fig. 5: Sujata Mohapatra Transferring Knowledge Through Demonstration (by Ignacio Moreno)	76
Fig. 6: Jagannātha's Mūrti	94
Fig. 7: Cauka Stance (by Ioannis Lignos)	100
Fig. 8: Tribhaṅga Stance (by Ioannis Lignos)	101
Fig. 9: Samabhaṅga Stance (by Ioannis Lignos)	102
Fig. 10: Abhaṅga Stance (by Ioannis Lignos)	103
Fig. 11: Basic Ektāla Rhythmic Patterns	106
Fig. 12: Performing Lajyā (by Ioannis Lignos)	148
Fig. 13: Egg-shaped Kinesphere	183
Fig. 14: Embodied geometries (by Carolina Prada)	184
Fig. 15: Ardhanārīśvara (by Ignacio Moreno)	196
Fig. 16: Odissi Full Costume and Jewellery (by Simon Richardson)	199
Fig. 17: Langaraj Temple, Bhubaneswar (by Ignacio Moreno)	200
Fig. 18: Written Forms of Self-Instruction (by Carolina Prada)	241
Fig. 19: Talking to One's Own Body	242

## NOTES ON TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLITERATION

Throughout the text, diacritical marks for Indian words are used, according to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) system. These words are italicised in their first appearance, but not in the subsequent usages. Names of places (Bhubaneswar, Konark, Vrindavana etc.) and languages (Sanskrit, Odia) are transliterated without diacritics in their conventional Romanised spelling. The final vowel (rāga, tāla, bhāva) is retained, and English plurals are applied (bhāvas, bols).

Following the Constitutional Amendment, approved in 2011, the spellings Odisha and Odia are preferred over Orissa and Oriya, which were still in use during the first stages of this research. This spelling is used also in the interview transcriptions. However, the terms Oriya, Orissa and Orissan are maintained when they appear in published works.

The interviews were transcribed *verbatim*. When some editing has been necessary, the amendments have been put in square brackets. Text in italics and square brackets describes gestures or movements that dancers used during the interview to complement their verbal explanations. All the excerpts used in the text are taken from the interviews, unless otherwise specified.

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. RESEARCH TOPIC

This dissertation examines somatic experience in Odissi, a classical Indian dance. In particular, it investigates how Odissi practitioners experience their body, mind, identity and sense of self in relation to the practice of dance and how these experiences are shaped by and articulated according to culturally specific values and meanings.

In order to inquire into this topic, this research involves subjects who both do and do not ascribe themselves to the cultural context with which Odissi is normally associated. In this way, this dissertation investigates the extent to which somatic experience is shaped by the dance training in a culturally relevant way, regardless of the cultural belonging claimed by its practitioners.

### 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Somatic experience is intended as the subjective experience of the body from within (Hanna, 1991). It also includes the subjective experience of the mind. In fact, from a first-person point of view, the body is not only an object of perception, but first and foremost the ground of perception itself and hence cognition. To talk about somatic experience is to

recognise that body and mind are inextricable components of the perceiving self and that the living body is mindful, as the mind is embodied (Thompson, 1996; Varela et al., 1993).

In particular, this research aims to investigate:

1. How dance practitioners articulate their somatic experience in dance training and performance.
2. How somatic experience is informed by culturally specific values, practices and discourses.
3. How somatic experience is intertwined with issues of power and difference.

These research questions are explored in relation to a particular movement vocabulary, Odissi, an Indian classical dance.

This style has been chosen to investigate somatic experience in dance for several reasons. Firstly because of the strong emphasis Odissi practitioners place, both during dance practice and aesthetic discourses, on perceiving the body from within and on connecting the body with the mind. Secondly because this dance style is considered informed by exclusive cultural values, which determine what is correct or aesthetically acceptable and what is not, and regulate the interactions between the subjects involved in the dance practice. Thirdly because such social relationships and aesthetic codes are defined by issues of power and difference concerning ethnicity, gender and artistic expertise. Fourthly because of the specific characteristics of the movement and choreographic vocabulary, in particular, the simultaneous use of different limbs to execute intricate gestures according to a relatively fixed set of rules, the specific relationships established between certain elements of the movements and certain elements of the music, the use of a culturally specific imagery to portray emotions and stylised psychophysical states, the stress on the

accurate memorisation of fixed, long and complex movement sequences, the emphasis on the movement detail, and finally the modalities in which the training is carried out.

These elements of the Odissi movement and choreographic vocabulary rely on complex cognitive processes explicitly related to the transmission, acquisition, development and performance of physical skills. Dancers often employ, both consciously and unconsciously, particular strategies to implement and make these cognitive processes more efficient. In addition, dancers are often used to verbally articulate these strategies and the subjective experience of their mental processes for the purpose of skill transmission. Due to the characteristics mentioned so far, Odissi provides a good case for investigating somatic experience. However, Odissi has been chosen to address the questions formulates above also because of my own direct involvement in the dance practice which has provided an advantage point in accessing dancers' experiences.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The main purpose of this research is to contribute to the understanding of how somatic experience is shaped within a culturally specific context and yet can be shared beyond that context, through the embodiment of cultural values and meanings. In fact, in this dissertation I suggest that dance training enables this process of embodied enculturation. In other words, I argue that, although culturally 'produced', somatic experience can be 'learned' by embodying the values and meanings that support it. Therefore, with my research I contest an essentialised view of cultural practices and cultural experiences, while at the same time I draw attention to the fact that practices and experiences are 'always already' culturally specific, in that they are sustained by distinctive shared values and meanings.

A few conceptual clarifications will set the backdrop to my discussion. The first one concerns my understanding of cultures and cultural practices as hybrid, open, complex and dynamic systems of values and meanings that are relatively distinctive and shared by a group of people. These cultural practices always overlap and interact with other, sometimes apparently contrasting, practices. In this sense, cultural practices are never exclusive, even when specific politics of 'purity' have been established. Therefore, I subscribe to the claim that all cultures and, in fact, all individuals are always hybrid (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Amselle, 1998). I define my informants as 'transcultural subjects' in order to emphasise the unbounded and hybrid character of their ascribed cultural belonging and status. Hence, a transcultural subject is, for me, a subject who belongs to different cultural contexts and assumes relatively contrasting values.

In accordance with this theoretical standpoint, in this research I involved subjects who, despite being all engaged in the practice of Odissi, did not share the same nationality, mother tongue or educational background and especially did not consider themselves as belonging to the same cultural context. By purposely disengaging a cultural practice from its 'official' cultural bearers, I wanted to investigate how practices and discourses, which are produced in a certain cultural context, inform the embodied experience of subjects who both do and do not claim belonging to that context. Therefore, in this dissertation I suggest that Odissi training 'shapes', in a culturally relevant way, how dancers experience and speak about their body, mind, identity and sense of self.

Odissi offers a good case for investigating this issue, because it is normally considered, by both practitioners and the wider audience, a dance style deeply rooted in the culture of Odisha, the state in the Northeast of India with which the emergence and aesthetics of this dance are associated. In fact, Odissi is named after this state, its name simply meaning 'from Odisha'.

As I will examine in the following chapter, the emergence of this dance is concomitant with and linked to the rise of socio-political movements related to Odia regionalism and ethnic revival. Nonetheless, since its establishment as a classical dance, Odissi has been learned and mastered by practitioners coming from all over India and the world. As these dancers have often visited and resided in Odisha, and continue to do so with the purpose of training and performing, practitioners from Odisha too have always travelled and continue to travel nationally and internationally to perform and teach. Hence, in this scenario, it is a debatable issue to establish who are the legitimate 'interpreters' of the dance form and what makes them so. In this dissertation, I advance the claim that, although culturally specific, in that informed by distinctive values and meanings, somatic experience is nevertheless accessible, on a transcultural basis, through the embodiment of those values and meanings that support it.

The second clarification needed for the development of my argument concerns my use of the terms 'meanings' and 'values'. I use the term 'meanings' to designate the explanations people give to their practices, discourses and experiences, while I use the term 'values' to stress the 'instructive' character of some of those meanings. I take a 'value' to regulate what is right or wrong, appealing or unappealing, and a 'meaning' to explain why something has a positive or negative value. Values are shared by groups of people and are what make a practice or a discourse culturally specific. Hence, I contend that values are culturally specific while at the same time I contest the idea that they are bounded to specific geographic, historical or ethnic areas. Values are embodied and, as such, they are transmitted through practices and discourses.

In my research I investigate not only how cultural values inform individuals' lives, but also how individuals take on and experience those values in their life, interpreting and making them their own. This shift in perspective is important because it takes culture to be a

personal 'enterprise' and relocates it in embodied practices and discourses, rather than associating it with a geographical, historical or ethnic bounded context. Throughout this dissertation, I often mention aesthetic values in conjunction with ethical and moral values, revealing the frequent overlap of these categories in the cultural context examined in this research.

My third conceptual clarification concerns the way I intend and use the term 'somatic experience'. The field of somatic inquiry has been set out by Hanna who has defined the *soma* as 'the body perceived from within by first-person perception' (1991: 31).

When a human being is observed from the outside - i.e. from a third-person point of view - the phenomenon of a human *body* is perceived. But, when this same human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human *soma*. (31)

In other words, somatic experience can be defined as the experience of the body from within. In particular, the term 'somatic' emphasises the living character of the body as subjectively experienced. Therefore, 'somatic' is a useful term in that it takes the body not as an entity *per se* but as the ground of experience.

In this work, I employ the term 'somatic' in order to emphasise the first-person perspective and experience of one's bodymind, while I use the term 'embodied' to stress the fact that experience is grounded in the living body and has a culturally shared character. I borrow and use throughout this work the concept of 'bodymind' from Zarrilli in order 'to refer to the simultaneous presence of both body-aspect and mind-aspect in all experience' (Zarrilli, 1998: 256, note 18).

Two basic postulates underpin this dissertation. The first postulate is that somatic experience is culturally shaped, while the second is that, despite being culturally originated, somatic experience is not bound to the 'original' context of emergence, but can be

accessed beyond this, through the embodiment of the values and meanings that support it. Consequently somatic experience is subject to change. In fact if, as Butler (1990) has suggested, identities are performative fictions, that can be taken on, as well as transformed or contested at any moment, what about the subjective embodied experiences behind those performative identities? How are these experiences shaped by culturally specific practices and how are they re-shaped by new cultural encounters and contexts? Does the embodiment of a certain dance vocabulary provide, through its performativity, a specific way of experiencing one's social identity, body, mind and self? How are these experiences and meanings grounded in cultural epistemologies? And how are these cultural epistemologies assumed by subjects who move, dance, feel and think transnationally and transculturally?

## 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research sits at the intersection of phenomenological anthropology and South Asian performing arts studies. It builds on the concept of embodied cognition, as explored both empirically in the cognitive and neurosciences, and philosophically in western and eastern traditions of thought. It also builds on studies on bodiliness, self, personhood, emotion and gender in South Asian cultures. Finally, this research draws on and in part challenges post-colonial theories of culture and identity.

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Phenomenological anthropology refers to the use of the phenomenological approach in ethnographic inquiry. This epistemic approach is inherited from the philosophical tradition known as phenomenology. According to this tradition, the objects of knowledge are

phenomena, things as they appear, rather than as they ontologically are. Therefore, phenomenology argues for a subjective view of perception and knowledge, and relies on experience as the way through which phenomena are accessed. Initiated by the German philosopher Husserl, the phenomenological tradition has found in Merleau-Ponty one of its most influential exponents. Merleau-Ponty (1962) developed Husserl's phenomenological epistemology by explicitly emphasising the importance of the body, and more precisely the living body, as the ground of perception and therefore of experience and knowledge. The phenomenological stress on subjectivity, experience and embodiment has been extremely influential in both the social sciences and more recently in the cognitive and neurosciences, as discussed below.

In the field of anthropology, a first attempt to introduce phenomenological ideas in the ethnographic process, appeared in Geertz's (1973). However, the use of the phenomenological approach to the study of cultural phenomena became more systematic after Clifford and Marcus (1986) *Writing Culture*. The introduction of the phenomenological approach in anthropological inquiry in the late 80s, and its consistent use in the 90s, meant a shift of focus from the big socio-political narratives, privileged by Marxist anthropologists, and the abstractions elaborated by the structuralists, towards the investigation of the lived experience of individuals as exponents of a particular cultural world. Rabinow's (2007) and Crapanzano's (1980) ethnographic work in Morocco are exemplary of this phenomenological shift.

Phenomenological anthropology investigates the subjective experience of life events and cultural practices and discourses. Phenomenological ethnography (Hollan, 2001; Katz and Csordas, 2003), existential anthropology (Jackson, 2005), as well as the anthropology of experience (Turner and Bruner, 1986) and the self (Coffey, 1999) are the offspring of the application of the phenomenological approach in anthropological studies and are often



simply different labels to identify a similar scope of inquiry, as Csordas' (1994) edited volume *Embodiment and Experience: the existential ground of culture and self* shows.

More importantly, the focus in anthropology on the individual experience rather than on cultural events per se has corresponded to a systematic inquiry into bodiliness, or the subject's bodily being-in-the-world. In fact, as Desjarlais and Throop (2011) highlight, in their review of phenomenological studies in anthropology, one of the most significant contributions of phenomenology to anthropological inquiry has been the focus and investigation on embodiment. Csordas' (1990, 1993, 1994) seminal writings on embodiment as a new paradigm for anthropology are key in this tradition and have been particularly influential in the identification and definition of my own research questions.

Csordas' builds on the work of the philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962), who, as mentioned above, takes the living body as the ground of experience, as well as on the work of the sociologist Bourdieu (1984), who analyses how social difference is acted out through bodily practices, and finally on the work of the philosopher Foucault (1979), who examines how power is inscribed in the body through discourses and practices. Csordas (1999) argues that to carry out research according to the paradigm of embodiment:

is not to study anything new or different, but to address familiar topics – healing, emotion, gender, or power- from a different standpoint. Embodiment is about neither behaviour nor essence per se, but about experience and subjectivity, [...]. There is not a special kind of datum or a special method for eliciting such data, but a methodological attitude that demands attention to bodiliness even in purely verbal data, such as written text or oral interview. (184)

Hence for Csordas, to speak about embodiment is primarily to speak of a 'methodological attitude' that takes the body and embodied experience as its primary concern.

Beyond the concept of embodiment, Csordas has also proposed the notion of 'somatic modes of attention'. Csordas defines 'somatic modes of attention' in terms of 'culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others' (1993: 139). As Ziemke et al. (2008) explain, this notion sheds light on how the way we attend to our own and other people's body, as well as the way we attend to other people's attending to our body is culturally shaped (94). The notion of somatic modes of attention is crucial in my research in that I investigate how somatic experience, and the articulation of this experience, is informed by specific values and meanings that underpin cultural practices and discourses.

Another influential approach to bodiliness in phenomenological anthropology has been provided by Stoller's (1997) sensuous ethnography. Sensuous ethnography is an ethnographic approach that does not rely only on observation and sight, but uses all the senses to acquire ethnographic data and in addition takes into account how these senses are culturally shaped. Stoller's notion of sensuous scholarship and Csordas' notion of somatic modes of attention provide the ground for my own notion of somatic data, as ethnographic data about somatic experience accessed through observation, as well as through touch, hearing and proprioception.

Lying in the field of phenomenological anthropology, my research focuses on the interplay between subjective experience, bodiliness and cultural values embedded in practices and discourses. In particular, it responds to Desjarlais and Throop's (2011) invitation to broaden the study of subjective experience to include the analysis of:

the relation between the phenomenal and the discursive—between, that is, experience, being, and sensate perception, on the one hand, and language, aesthetic and rhetorical forms, and communicative practices more generally on the other hand (97).

Building on this invitation, in my research I examine how somatic experience is shaped by embodied practices and discourses about dance aesthetics and ethics.

Desjarlais and Throop's invitation to investigate the relation between the phenomenal and the discursive responds to several criticisms phenomenological anthropology has been subject to in the last decade. Among these, Desjarlais and Throop (2011) mention the Marxist argument that the phenomenological tradition ignores socio-political and economical factors determining people's life. Other opponents of this approach to cultural analysis have argued that phenomenological methodology is weak, lacking objectivity and generally not applicable beyond its limited scope of investigating subjective experience. Finally, suspicions have been raised against the epistemological postulate on which this tradition lies, which is that subjective experience can be accessed and, even more, examined from a third-person point of view.

Despite these criticisms, the phenomenological approach has found consistent application not only in anthropological studies and in general in the social sciences, but more recently also in the cognitive sciences. This suggests that this research method has something to offer to the wider community of scholars and is fruitful in challenging centuries-long assumptions, opening new lines of inquiry in the nature of human beings.

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH IN MUSIC AND DANCE STUDIES

The phenomenological approach has also been applied to the study of particular dance and movement cultures. For instance, Lewis (1995) uses phenomenology in the study of capoeira, a Brazilian dance-martial art, coming to the conclusion that body practitioners, such as dancers or athletes, experience their bodily presence in the world differently from how the majority of people do. In fact, they dwell most of the time between two states of

consciousness: 'the consciousness of one's bodily presence and the unconsciousness as bodily absence' (235). The notion of 'intermediary state' of consciousness, proposed by Lewis, has given me hints on interpreting the subjective experience of body-mind relationships in Odissi training and performance, examined in Layer II. Another influential application of the phenomenological approach to the study of capoeira is Downey's (2002) work on the cultural character of listening. Drawing on Stoller's sensuous ethnography, Downey discusses how the sense of listening in this dance-martial art is embodied and culturally specific. On the same line of thought, Cohen Bull (1997) suggests that different dance cultures prioritise certain senses over others.

Building on Cohen Bull's argument, Hahn (2007) provides a subtle phenomenological analysis of the Japanese dance *niho buyo*, suggesting that values specific to Japanese culture are transmitted and embodied through dance practices. A phenomenological approach is also employed by Zarrilli both in his study of the South Indian martial art *kalaripayattu* (1998) and his writing on the actor training (2004). In one of his most convincing passages, Zarrilli (1998) suggests that training in *kalaripayattu* works on the body in order to reach the mind and in so doing it transforms experience itself. Therefore, Zarrilli suggests that training in a certain bodily discipline transforms experience. This is coherent with Stoller's views on the cultural character of perception.

Similarly to Hahn, in this dissertation, I argue that training in a particular movement discipline implies the embodiment of culturally specific values and, similarly to Zarrilli, I suggest that these values, discourses and practices inform somatic experience. However, this basic argument carries the more general conclusion that culturally informed ways of experiencing one's body, mind, self and the world are accessible not only to the 'native' or to the conscious ethnographer who has 'gone native', but in fact to any practitioner of that particular bodily discipline. If somatic experience can be accessed through the embodiment

of practices and the subscription to specific cultural discourses, therefore somatic experience is not an exclusive realm, but a shared terrain where people can empathetically connect with each other. In addition to this, in this research I attempt to reveal how issues of power and difference are not only inscribed in the body-object, proposed by Foucault (1979), but inform also the body-subject and ground of perception, proposed by Merleau-Ponty (1962). In other words I suggest that not only the body itself, but also perception and somatic experience are informed by issues of power and difference. This analysis of power and difference shows the many-faceted nature of embodied experience and its implication with socio-political and economical aspects, therefore responding to the Marxist criticism mentioned above. By emphasising the role of practices and discourses in shaping the experience of the body, mind and self, my research also responds to the criticism that phenomenological anthropology has received for neglecting the role of 'language, aesthetic and rhetorical forms, and communicative practices', as Desjarlais and Throop put it, in shaping somatic experience. Finally, by bringing the informants' voice at the centre of the analysis, this dissertation allows space for understanding how different subjects manipulate shared practices and meanings in order to assert their needs and agency.

## EMBODIED COGNITION: EMPIRICAL STUDIES AND PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUES

While certainly lying in the field of phenomenological anthropology, this research also draws on empirical findings on embodied cognition and especially on certain concepts employed by the cognitive sciences. In particular, this research takes as its starting point the notions of body image and body schema, as discussed by Gallagher (Gallagher, 1995, 2005; Gallagher and Cole, 1998). Gallagher (2005) defines the body image as 'a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body', and the body schema as 'a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of

perceptual monitoring' (24). According to Gallagher a clear distinction between these two categories, which have been often used interchangeably in the cognitive sciences and psychological studies (Cash, Thomas F. and Pruzinsky, T., 2002), will prove useful to achieve a more accurate understanding of embodied cognition. Gallagher investigates these two terms of embodiment through the examination of clinical cases, combining phenomenological analysis with findings from the neurosciences.

Building on Gallagher's conceptual distinction, Mullis (2008) applies the notions of body image and body schema to the performing arts training, arguing that the performer employs a body image to develop his or her bodily skills and therefore body schema. According to Mullis, the assimilation of skills implies the gradual recession of one's body image below the level of explicit consciousness. Similarly, this research starts with an investigation of what body image and body schema are in the specific case of Odissi dance, and how practitioners develop and use their body image or schema with different degrees of consciousness. This research also examines how these notions of embodied experience are informed by cultural values and meanings, therefore investigating how cognition and somatic experience are shaped by practices and discourses, an aspect that most cognitive studies often neglect to take into account.

Gallagher's use of both phenomenological and empirical methods to investigate embodiment, or more precisely the embodied nature of human cognition, is not an exception, but responds to a generally felt need to bring qualitative and quantitative research about the mind, perception and consciousness closer. In fact, a growing number of cognitivists have begun recognising that systematic phenomenological inquiry can shed light on how cognition works, how perception is grounded in the living body and eventually what is consciousness and how the sense of self arises. Particularly relevant in this respect is the work of Varela, Thompson and Rosch (Thompson, 1996; Varela et al., 1993). Overtly

influenced by western phenomenological tradition, these scholars heavily draw also on eastern philosophies of mind and psychophysical practices aimed at achieving particular states of consciousness.

The dialogue with eastern traditions of thought and the analysis of the psychosomatic practices associated with these philosophical systems is at the core of the volume *Self, no self? Perspectives from analytical, phenomenological, and Indian traditions* (Siderits et al., 2010). However, the concern with finding consistencies and differences between western phenomenology and eastern philosophical traditions, as well as the use of Indian meditative practices, such as Buddhist meditation, to shed light on the nature of consciousness and on the relation between body and mind have precipitated a number of publications (Jakubczak, 2008; King, 1999; Malhotra, 1997; Morley, 2008; Rao, 1998, 2005, 2012a, b; Sarukkai, 2002; Schweizer, 1993), almost creating an intercultural comparative tradition in the field of the cognitive studies.

Phenomenological speculations on the embodied nature of perception, and therefore cognition or the mind, have found empirical evidence in the discovery of the mirror neurons, initially in the brain of primates and subsequently in the human brain (Di Pellegrino G. et al., 1992; Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004). The mirror neurons are neurons that fire both when the subject is performing an action, and when the subject is either seeing or hearing someone else performing the same action. These neurons, according to the neuroscientists that have discovered them, would prove the connection between perception and action and therefore the embodied character of human cognition. The mirror neurons theory has proved useful also in the understanding of emotions (Niedenthal et al., 2009). The discovery of the mirror neurons system has motivated further studies on the relationship between perception and action, for which music and dance have proved

useful sources of investigation (Aucouturier, 2006; Bläsing et al., 2010; Calvo-Merino et al., 2005; Naveda and Leman, 2010; Winters, 2008).

## SOUTH ASIAN PERFORMING ARTS SCHOLARSHIP

If, in terms of theoretical and methodological approach, this dissertation lies in the field of phenomenological anthropology, for the subject investigated it contributes more directly to the field of south Asian performing arts studies, and in particular to Indian classical dance scholarship. As Chatterjea (1996a) has observed, dance research, and in fact the establishment of a classical dance tradition in India, has been deeply influenced by the experience of British colonialism. This is true to the extent that Indian dance scholarship could be said to provide, whether programmatically or not, an account of the ideological and often asymmetrical dialogue between the West and the East, during both colonial and post-colonial times. Therefore, to talk about Indian dance scholarship is to talk at the same time of the history of Indian classical dance.

Dance research in India initially developed as a response to the revivalist movement, emerged in the sub-continent a couple of decades before Independence. Influenced by western nationalist ideologies, the revivalist movement aimed at identifying and establishing a tradition able to prove the cultural wealth and singularity of the British colony. The revival was a complex process of reconstruction, and in part creation, of a national identity and tradition, in which dance played a crucial role.<sup>1</sup> During the British rule, traditional forms of dance, in particular the dance of the temple servants, known as *devadāsīs*, had been associated with prostitution and consequently banned. However, under the influence of western artists, such as the dancer Anna Pavlova, and philanthropists, such as Annie Besant, Indian revivalists identified in dance a powerful

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<sup>1</sup> On the invention of national traditions and identities in Europe, see Hobsbawm and Ranger (2000).



symbol of the cultural wealth of the Indian sub-continent, a wealth that, if not rescued, would have disappeared forever. Indian revivalists programmatically decided to recover traditional dance forms, and in particular the dance of the devadāsīs, from its moral and aesthetic decay and to establish a classical dance of India, on the model of western ballet.

The Brahmin girl Rukmini Devi and, in a different way, Balasaraswati, a dancer belonging to the traditional devadāsīs community, were some of the most important protagonists of the revivalist movement, which gave birth to the dance Bharata Natyam (O'Shea, 1998, 2007).

As Allen (1997) has suggested, the establishment of Bharata Natyam as a classical dance implied a process of re-population (with the appropriation of the dance tradition from the devadāsīs community by the new Indian middle-upper class), re-construction (with the putting together of the movement vocabulary), re-naming (with the changing of the traditional name *sadir* into Bharata Natyam), re-situation (with the moving of the dance from the temple to the stage), and re-storation (with the putting together of different elements to give them an historical appearance).

Initially meant to represent the dance heritage of the whole British colony, Bharata Natyam, which literally means 'dance of India', was later on associated with the emergence of the South Indian and, for that matter, Tamil regionalist movement (O'Shea, 2007). This shift of focus corresponded to the quests, rising all over India, for the recognition of local dance traditions as distinct from Bharata Natyam and yet worth the classical status. The spreading of regionalist movements in India caused the creation and establishment of other classical dance vocabularies, including Kathak and Odissi. The quest for classical status depended on the identification of evidence able to prove the antiquity and relatively independent development of the different regional dance forms. It is in these particular ideological circumstances that the field of Indian dance scholarship emerged. Therefore, immediately after the independence from the British rule, research on Indian dance was

born as a search for the ancient roots of Indian performing arts and as a search for a common aesthetics shared at the national level, not only among the performing arts, but in fact among all artistic expressions of India. This common national aesthetics also included explicit references to the religious, spiritual and philosophical substratum of the country. The work of Kapila Vatsyayan (1968) is perhaps the most relevant and systematic in this respect (O'Shea, 2000).

Other scholars working at the local level strived to identify the origin, development and aesthetic singularity of regional dance vocabularies. The construction of regional dance traditions corresponded to a process of selection of sources, cleansing of memories, exclusion of certain subjects from the revival. For instance, in the case of Odissi, the story of the local devadāsīs, called *māhāris*, served the revivalists in guaranteeing a spiritual aura to the new dance form and in corroborating its link to Hindu temple life and hence to religious worship (Roy, 2009). However, according to Roy (2009), the *māhāris* were never involved in the revival of Odissi. In fact, they were systematically marginalised. On a similar line of argument, Pathy (2007) has suggested that the revivalists never acknowledged the aesthetic influence of local visual and performing arts traditions in the definition of the classical Odissi vocabulary. According to Pathy, Odissi revivalists did not consider these folk arts worth being considered as the roots of a dance tradition that was claiming classical status. Different was the case of the gotipua dance (Kothari, 1968), a folk performing art tradition, to which some of the protagonists of the Odissi revival belonged and of which Odissi was soon considered a refined form.

If the initial concern of Indian dance scholarship was, as Chatterjea (1996a) notes, with identifying the ancient origins of the different regional dance idioms, securing their adherence to common Indian aesthetic principles and at the same time identifying the peculiarities of their movement and choreographic vocabulary, a shift of focus in dance

research took place in the '80s. Influenced by post-colonial and gender studies, a number of scholars began to question the dominant narrative about the history of Indian dance and to reveal its ideological ground and the acts of power and exclusion that this narrative had perpetrated. In particular, extensive research has been done, from the '80s until recently, on the institution of the devadāsīs, on their history before and during the British rule, on the appropriation of their dance knowledge by the new Indian middle-upper class, on the main protagonists of the dance revival (Allen, 1997; Apffel-Marglin, 1985; Jordan, 2003; Meduri, 2001; O'Shea, 2007; Srinivasan, 1985). In general, following Chatterjee's (1989, 1993) post-colonial critique of Indian nationalist discourse with its emphasis on the category of the spiritual and on the role of women in preserving the true nature of the Indian nation, this dance scholarship emphasises the ideological influence of the West on the definition, and consequently establishment and development of a classical Indian dance tradition. It also focuses on the subaltern role of the devadāsīs, often portraying them as the victims of the revival (Apffel-Marglin, 1985; Roy, 2009).

A few scholars, from the field of dance studies (Chakravorty, 2000-1), ethnomusicology (Clayton, 2007) and anthropology (van der Veer, 1999, 2009) have recently begun to recognise, and even stress, the mutual ideological influence of East and West aesthetics during colonial and postcolonial times, providing scope for a more nuanced understanding of modern cultural history. Indian dance scholarship would greatly benefit from this shift of perspective, as well. Instead of reading the history of Indian classical dance, and in fact, of Indian national culture, as an emulation of western nationalist ideologies, an incorporation of orientalist desires and a reaction to materialist values through a programmatic appeal to Indian spirituality, post-colonial studies and Indian dance scholarship within these would gain new insights by looking at the cultural relationships between the West and India according to a more dialogic paradigm. This shift of perspective does not imply the neglect of socio-political and economical issues, but provides a more mobile understanding of

power as something that is continuously negotiated and possessed in different forms and by different subjects. This view of power requires a focus on the individual and on how this makes sense of shared meanings and values. Therefore, this research builds on the premise that Indian dance scholarship should give space to new lines of inquiry that, leaving the ideological narrative in the background, take into account the lived experience of the real protagonists training, performing, teaching and choreographing nowadays.

Important steps in this direction are already present in the work of Chakravorty (2008) on Kathak, another Indian classical dance style. In her ethnography *Bells of Change*, Chakravorty combines historiographical with phenomenological analysis, arguing that, despite reproducing a patriarchal narrative of women subordination, the practice of Indian classical dance is experienced by practitioners as an opportunity for individual empowerment, although, as also suggested by Weidman (2003) in the case of South Indian music, this sense of empowerment must not be intended in a classical liberatory sense, but as the power to produce effects. Similarly, in this dissertation I show on the one hand how categories such as gender and spirituality are the result of a non-linear ideological dialogue between East and West during both colonial and post-colonial times, and on the other hand how individual subjects appropriate and make sense of these categories for themselves, in order to fulfil their particular interests and exercise a certain degree of agency.

The idea that different subjects make sense of shared categories for themselves underpins also recent scholarship on the practice of Indian classical dance on the global stage. For example O'Shea's (2007) research on Bharatanatyam and Sikand's (2010) doctoral dissertation on Odissi explore how notions of tradition and authenticity are interpreted by practitioners operating in different sites of the globe. Employing both historiographical and anthropological inquiry, both O'Shea and Sikand conclude that the notions of tradition and authenticity are fluid, creatively manipulated and challenged by different dancers and

choreographers, while being interwoven with nationalist and regionalist politics, as well as discourses about gender and class in both colonial and post-colonial times. These works especially show that Indian classical dances are not frozen in time, as dominant narratives often want them, but continuously changing and adjusting to particular needs and circumstances.

Despite the insistence on the local character of Indian classical dances often perpetrated by nationalist and regionalist discourses, the historical development of these performing arts out of the dialogue between eastern and western aesthetics makes it questionable, if not impossible, to identify the production of these dance practices with circumscribed geographies. Therefore, any notion of locality requires a critical consideration of how this has emerged in relation to categories considered non-local. This implies an acknowledgement and understanding of the global and transnational scenario in which different localities and cultural practices are produced and circulate.

This dissertation focuses on the local character of the values that inform dance practices and discourses. However, at the same time it questions the essentialised relationship of certain cultural categories with the circumscribed geography and reified ethnicity to which they are normally associated. It does so by showing the hybrid nature of these categories, and especially by investigating how these are embodied and experienced by transnational and global subjects. Therefore, this research recognises the dialogue between the local and the global and investigates how the global and the local incorporate each other through acts of inclusion and exclusion.

Odissi is nowadays a global practice that brings together both virtually and physically a heterogeneous community of dancers, distributed all over the world. This transnational community of Odissi practitioners may have in common nothing else than the dance practice itself. Yet the embodiment of the dance aesthetics may make them experience and

share a similar bodiliness. When this bodiliness is supported by common cultural meanings, it forms a dance somatic culture. This dissertation does not argue that all Odissi dancers all over the world share this dance culture and have similar embodied experiences. Instead, it argues that the dance is informed by cultural values, which are considered specific, although they may have a hybrid origin. It also argues that these values are embodied through practices and discourses and provide categories through which to make sense of one's embodied experiences. In other words, this research investigates on the one hand how cultural values are embodied through dance training, and on the other hand how individual subjects appropriate these shared values to make sense of experience for themselves and to respond to particular needs and circumstances.

Although this research was mainly carried out within a circumscribed geography, a dance school in New Delhi and a dance school in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, it developed in constant dialogue with the global scenario, by involving transnational and transcultural practitioners, that is to say individuals who live and move across national and cultural borders. If carried out in the UK, USA or Japan this research would perhaps bring to different conclusions than those formulated in this dissertation. However, this would imply a clear distinction between practitioners living and operating mainly in the West and those living and operating mainly in India or elsewhere. Although this distinction is sensible, it is also often questioned by the fact that many of these subjects actually live and operate across national and cultural borders as the subjects directly involved in this research also show. Odissi dancers are mobile subjects who continuously cross national and cultural boundaries for the purpose of training, performing and teaching. Dancers from India regularly visit the West, as well as the Far East, to perform and conduct workshops. Practitioners from all over the world, including South America and China, spend weeks, months and sometimes years in Bhubaneswar, New Delhi or Bangalore to learn from their gurus. Performers of any nationality travel to take part in dance festivals both in India and anywhere else in the

world. In front of this scenario, categories of the local and the global, and in fact ideas about ethnicity and culture are useful only to defend political needs, but deficient in explaining the reality of dance practice nowadays. While it would be short-sighted to argue that there are not differences between the different localities and practitioners based in different corners of the planet, as O'Shea's (2007) and Sikand's (2010) research mentioned above also show, it would be equally short-sighted to ignore that Odissi is a transcultural and transnational practice with its own global community that share similar values. These values are embodied through the dance practice and vocabulary, although specific subjects interpret and adjust their meaning according to personal views and circumstances. The appreciation of this present situation makes this research valid beyond the geographical scope in which it was carried out.

In conclusion, apart from the work of Zarrilli (1984, 1998, 2011b), Chatterjea (1996b), and the already mentioned phenomenological study of Kathak by Chakravorty (2008), little systematic research has been carried out on training, somatic experience and the embodiment of values in Indian classical dance. This dissertation aims to fill this gap while at the same time taking into account how somatic experience is interwoven with discourses of power.

## 5. THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCESS

The research questions that motivated my inquiry into somatic experience in Odissi and underpin the argument supported in this dissertation, emerged initially in the form of embodied intuitions in the course of my own dance practice. Before being initiated into Odissi, I had been training into a diverse range of dance styles and psychophysical disciplines including African dance, Arabic dance and Yoga. In fact, my dance training

developed in large part in parallel to my studies in cultural anthropology and to my exposure to specific theoretical and methodological approaches to the analysis of human behaviour. Therefore, the embodiment of different dance vocabularies has been informed by my familiarity with anthropological concepts. Similarly my academic research interests have been influenced by my dance practice and gradually focused on the analysis of the human body as a cultural production.

When I began my training in Odissi I had already realised how specific dance vocabularies portray particular images of the body and support distinctive aesthetic values. I was already tuned to the perception of subtle sensations in the body, and to the identification of differences and similarities across movement vocabularies. I had already become aware that different styles emphasise certain parts of the body and develop certain skills rather than others. However, Odissi technique offered a completely new and largely unexpected way of relating to my dancing body. As a beginner, I could clearly see the gap between my own and the ideal image of the dancing body in Odissi. I could perceive my own body as a project and see training as a process through which to reach a clear aesthetic goal. I had realised that I had to consciously and systematically lead my body towards this specific goal and that I had to do so through discipline, individual practice and by taking into careful account the corrections given by my teacher.

While training in Odissi and interacting with other practitioners, I became aware that I was embodying not simply a choreographic vocabulary, but rather a distinctive way of experiencing my body and my mind, together with an array of aesthetic and moral values concerning, among others, the relationship between me and my teacher, my individual body and the ideal image of the dancing body, the dance and the music accompaniment, training and performance. I became aware that the way I was relating to my body and mind in dance was not idiosyncratic, but common among the Odissi dancers I was interacting



with. I also realised that I was thinking, feeling and articulating my mental and physical experience in a way that was suggested by the training itself and in particular by what the teacher and other practitioners were saying and doing during the transmission process and in relation to public performance. Therefore, by interacting with other practitioners, I realised that my embodied intuitions had a common and shared value.

Moved by my interest in the relationship between the body and cultural values, I set out to inquire into embodied experience in Odissi in a more systematic way. The purpose was to investigate how Odissi practitioners make sense of their somatic experience in dance and how their subjective experiences are informed by shared cultural values. My initial research focus was on the subjective articulation of the cognitive processes involved when acquiring, mastering, performing and transmitting dance skills and knowledge.

These research interests relate to a substantial body of literature on cognitive science and phenomenology. As mentioned above, Gallagher's work (1995, 2005; 1998; 2010) on the distinction between body image and body schema, Varela and Thompson's (1993) and Thompson's (1996) concepts of embodied mind and mindful body and their reference to eastern philosophies, Gibson's (1979) ecological approach to visual perception and Clarke's (2005) application of this ecological approach to aural perception, provided me with the conceptual tools and theoretical framework to design my research questions. The concepts of body image and body schema (Campbell, 1995; Cash, Thomas and Pruzinsky, T., 2002; Cash, Thomas F. and Pruzinsky, T., 2002), as well as Parvianien's distinction between bodily skills and bodily knowledge (2002) helped me to gather the data about the experience of body and mind analysed and discussed in Layers III and II. Similarly useful were recent empirical studies on the relationship between auditory or visual perception and action (Corness, 2008; Iyer, 2002; Naveda and Leman, 2010; Sedlmeier et al., 2011), as well as that between action and emotion (Niedenthal et al., 2009; Winters, 2008). Palmer and

Jancoviack's (1996) writing on imagery was equally influential in defining my investigation into the use of cognitive models to represent emotions and psychophysical states in performance. However, an analysis of this literature showed that such empirical studies and philosophical speculations often ignored the cultural components of cognition in defining research questions. They often underestimated the subjective experience of certain mental states and the analysis of how these experiences acquire particular positive or negative meaning within a specific cultural setting.

Taking this observation as a starting point, in my research I wanted to investigate not only the subjective experience of the embodied mind in a particular bodily based practice, such as Odissi, but also and especially the extent to which this experience and its verbal and physical articulation is shaped by cultural practices and discourses. I wanted to understand how certain psychophysical states acquire particular meanings and the extent these meanings are provided by the cultural context in which the embodied practice takes place. In particular, I was interested in investigating whether or not Odissi practitioners would use a body image to develop the specific body schema required by the dance aesthetics, and how the body image interacts with the body schema or the practical embodied skills, how this body image is created, what it consists of and how dancers relate to it during their individual practice in order to develop their skills. I was also interested in understanding the role of music and auditory perception in the process of acquiring and performing certain kinetic skills. Finally, I wanted to inquire into the use of imagery in the interpretation of particular characters and emotions in complex choreographic compositions. In other words, I wanted to investigate how dancers evoke, provoke and portray certain psychophysical states, what kind of imagery they use to support their performative practice and what their somatic experience is when training or performing.

Given my interest in the subjective and shared character of these experiences, as well as in the cultural meanings attributed to them in a specific cultural context, I opted to use a person-centered ethnographic approach (LeVine, 1982). Hollan (2001) explains that 'a primary focus of person-centered ethnographies is on the individual and on how the individual's psychology and subjective experience both shapes, and is shaped by social and cultural processes' (2001: 48). The purpose is to convey the 'emotional saliency and motivational force of cultural beliefs and symbols (rather than to assume such saliency and force)' (49). A person-centered ethnographic approach combines phenomenological with anthropological inquiry. It is phenomenological in investigating subjective experience, and anthropological in highlighting the shared character of this experience.

As Hollan suggests, contemporary person-centered studies investigate either one or more of the following issues: what people verbally say about their subjective experience; what people behaviourally do that reveals their subjective experience; and finally how people embody their subjective experience, 'or conversely, how do the senses of the body, culturally elaborated in different ways, give rise to the sense of oneself and other?' (52). Addressing these three questions, this research concomitantly examines of the discourses (what people say), the practices (what people do), and somatic experiences about the body, mind and self in Odissi dance (how people embody meanings and values).

This work is based on the examination of qualitative data, gathered through ethnographic methods such as interviews and participant observation (Bernard, 2006; Katz and Csordas, 2003; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Shaffir, 2001). It is also informed by the theoretical and methodological standpoints of practice-led research (Barbour, 2006; Haseman, 2006, 2007), where the embodied engagement of the researcher in the research process is both the object and the tool for investigation. Despite being aware of the limitation of ethnographic techniques, as discussed by Schwartz & Schwartz (1969), Hammersley (2006)

and Atkinson and Coffey (2001), I considered phenomenological interviews and participant observation the most appropriate tools for identifying the cultural constants of discourses, practices and experiences.

Through interviews I aimed to gather verbal accounts of somatic experience in dance, while through participant observation I aimed to collect somatic data. Somatic data are data articulated and communicated through means other than words, such as touch, observation, listening or kinaesthesia. These data are particularly important considering the embodied character of dance practice. Through participant observation I was also able to access and register informal and extemporaneous verbal articulations, which were more difficult to retrieve and discuss in the formal setting of a one-to-one interview. These verbal articulations, which often took the form of verbal corrections given by the teacher to the student or verbal observations about particular aspects or experiences of the dance shared among practitioners, provided an important entry point for formulating my interview questions and consequently for accessing and further investigating subjective embodied experience during the more formal interview setting.

Participant observation meant for me to be involved as much as possible in training and performing, using my own body and experience as a platform to produce and test ideas. However, I was not interested in the idiosyncratic character of my own experience, but on the shared, interpersonal and collective aspects of somatic experience among Odissi practitioners. Therefore, my research did not aim to be a reflexive investigation of embodied experience, where the main field of analysis is the experience of the researcher herself. Rather, my purpose was to use the embodied understanding of a dance practice as a form of ethnographic participant observation. In conceiving participant observation as multi-sensorial, I was inspired by the classical work of Stoller (1997) on sensual ethnography and his influence in the field of dance studies, in particular by Cohen Bull's

writing on how different dance cultures privilege certain senses over others (1997) and by Hahn's (2007) endorsement of these theoretical standpoints in her monograph on Niho Buyo.

The collection of somatic data through participant observation was also influenced by Samudra's (2008) notion of 'thick participation'. Elaborating Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description as the basic goal of ethnography, Samudra argues that embodied practices, such as dance or martial arts, require the ethnographer to carry out thick participation, which she describes as follows:

Thick participation is [...] cultural knowledge recorded first in the anthropologist's body and only later externalised as a visual or textual data for purposes of analysis. Although thick participation is similar to Clifford Geertz's (1973:20-21) "thick description" in its attention to detail, it differs in that it does not focus on interpreting social discourse. Rather, it centers on sharing social experience. (667)

Contrary to what Samudra suggests, however, my research combines the analysis of social discourses about embodied experience with the analysis of embodied experience itself through an examination of somatic data, gathered through observation, listening and proprioception especially in the process of dance transmission. For instance, Odissi teachers often use demonstrations and hands-on techniques to explain or correct certain skills, with the purpose of communicating and transferring embodied knowledge in a thorough and accurate way. Dancers learn to perceive and decode this information acquired and shared somatically, through touch, observation, listening and proprioception, without being necessarily able to articulate it through words.

I collected these somatic data by jotting down my multi-sensorial observations acquired especially during dance training in a small notebook and elaborating them in my ethnographic diary. This implies that I had to translate most of the non-verbal data that

characterise the process of dance transmission into verbal notes. Although this was not always an easy task, for the peculiar nature of the topic I was investigating, I was confident that my difficulties in putting my insights into words were not much different from the difficulty any ethnographer would encounter in reporting through language real-life situations, complex cultural practices and social events. Ethnography is always a form of translating real life into written accounts, as Geertz has argued, with the limitations that this process of translation naturally implies.

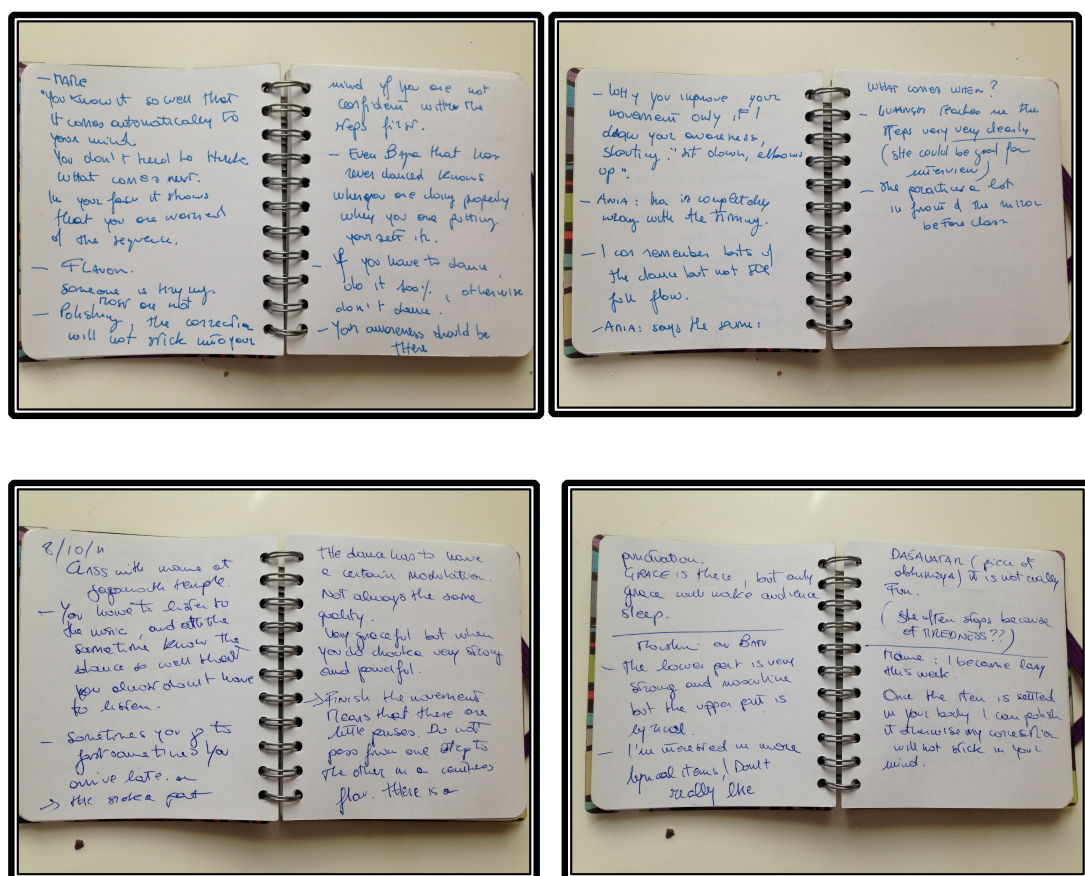


FIG. 1: ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD NOTES

The insights gained through thick participation and through a critical examination of my own embodied experience were constantly tested during the interviews with a selected number of Odissi dancers. The interviewees were chosen among the people who were accessible to me, willing to participate in the research, able to speak English and elaborate their thoughts. However, I also had the chance to interview people who were not very

articulate. Despite the frustration that this caused on the spot, an analysis of the position of these subjects in the network of power relations revealed that their resistance in talking and responding to my questions with elaborate answers, was a way of assuming an inferior position, not so much in relation to the interviewer, as much in relation to the practice of dance itself. In fact, these reluctant interviewees were often young practitioners who did not consider themselves entitled to be interviewed on the grounds of their limited experience of Odissi. For instance, one of my interviewees insisted that I had to interview his father, who was a pakhawaj player, rather than him who was studying Odissi dance. On the other hand, most of the practitioners I interacted with during my fieldwork were able to speak English, often better than myself. In fact, English is nowadays used as *lingua franca*, during training, although often interspersed with local languages such as Hindi, Bengali and Odia.

Nineteen informants were selected in order to reflect the variety, in terms of age, nationality, expertise and degree of involvement in dance practice of the practitioners I interacted with during my fieldwork.<sup>2</sup> The semi-structured interviews were carried out normally in my own or in the interviewee's house and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. For my interviews, I used a list of open-ended questions, covering three main topics: the interviewee's dance background and reasons they took up dance training; experience of the body and mind during training and performance, with a focus on the mechanisms practitioners used to acquire, develop, master and perform the dance skills; and dance aesthetics, especially what practitioners considered correct or acceptable in the dance and what they deemed unacceptable.

The first set of questions allowed the interviewees to introduce themselves and explain their dance experience, including positioning themselves within the dance community,

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<sup>2</sup> A list with details of the interviewees and of where and when the interviews took place is provided in the Appendix.

explaining the reasons why they had decided to undergo intensive training in Odissi and how this training had affected their life, self-perception and bodily experience. With the second set of questions I was able to investigate somatic experience in dance. In particular, I focused on the experience of the body and the mind when learning or practicing new skills or when recalling skills acquired in the past. For instance, I often asked the interviewees what kind of strategies they were employing to develop a certain skill, in what aspect of that skill they were focusing, how their bodily awareness had been changing in the process of acquiring a skill, and how they could monitor their improvements. I would ask if they were using a mirror during individual practice and, if so, how they believed the use of the mirror changed their bodily experience and their focus in developing or performing a certain skill. I also investigated on how they used the teacher's corrections and how they would translate these corrections into embodied skills. I would ask the interviewees whether they considered music, and consequently aural perception, relevant to the acquisition of the skills and, if so, how the music contributed to the learning process and to the quality of their performance. Finally I would ask the interviewees whether they employed some specific images in performing certain skills and, if so, what kind of images worked well for them, being able to inquire into the use of imagery in dance. With the third set of questions, I was able to investigate the concept of body image, and the components of this body image, consequently drawing a picture of the aesthetic and moral values underpinning the practice of Odissi dance.

The major difficulty I encountered in investigating somatic experience through the qualitative tool of phenomenological interview was to identify the right words and to formulate my questions in a way, which was relevant and meaningful to my interviewees. The meaning of concepts such as body image, body schema, imagery, cognitive models, aural or visual perception were not immediately accessible to the informants. The solution was to simplify my theoretical concepts and to work through key words. For instance, for



an Odissi practitioner the word 'imagery' does not make much sense unless it is explicitly associated with *abhinaya*, or pantomimic dance. To explore the use of imagery in performance, I would ask dancers to tell me what they were thinking or imagining when acquiring or performing a skill. Similarly the investigation of the body image became mostly an investigation of the aesthetic and moral values underpinning the practice of dance. To investigate the relation between aural perception and somatic experience, I would ask practitioners to talk about the importance of music in the process of learning and performing, and the relationship between listening and doing. In general, at the beginning of the interview I would inform the interviewee about the main goal of my research, arguing that I was investigating embodied experience in dance, in other words what they would feel, think or do during training and performance, focusing on the innermost sensations.

During my first interviews I carefully avoided reproducing the distinction between body and mind, which has been profoundly challenged both philosophically by the phenomenological approach to perception, and empirically by the recent findings in the field of the cognitive sciences mentioned above. However, ethnographic observations suggested that the categories of body and mind were crucial to the articulation of somatic experience in dance. These ethnographic observations also suggested that to speak about body and mind in Odissi is necessarily to speak about the sense of self in relation to the practice of dance. Therefore, the investigation of somatic experience in Odissi soon became an examination of the experience of the body and the mind and consequently of the sense of self in relation to the practice of dance. It also became an investigation of gender and ethnic identity and of the culturally specific meanings dancers attributed to all these experiences.

My research questions were constantly adjusted to the profile of the interviewee and to the natural development of the interview. Although I tried to cover all the topics with each

participant, it was clear that certain issues were less relevant to certain subjects than to others, or they were relevant but from a different point of view. For instance, there was little point in asking teachers how they were developing their skills, because in the context in which the practice takes place it is taken for granted that they are those who possess the skills, although teachers would also say that one's knowledge and understanding is never complete. Rather, I would ask them what kind of strategies they would suggest students to employ in order to develop the dance skills.

In both conducting the interviews and carrying out my participant observation, through my own involvement in the practice of dance as a trainee and performer, I was aware that my data could be deemed to suffer from subjectivity. This is however an old problem in anthropological research and in fact in all qualitative research. Moved by the firm belief that there is no form of knowledge that is truly objective and no way that a collection of data is not informed by the basic assumptions of the researcher, I recognise that there is not a clear distinction between my own and my informants' subjective experience.

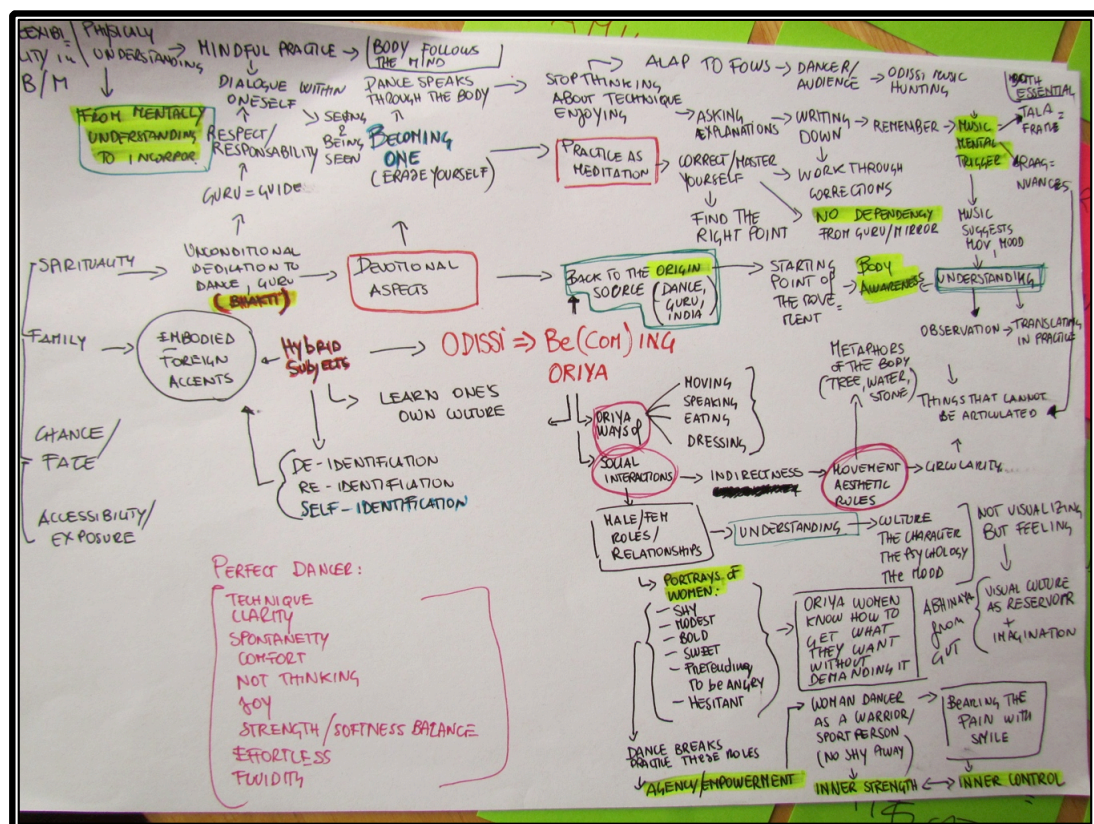
Therefore the outcome of this research is the result of a constant embodied dialogue between the researcher and the subjects at the centre of her research, which include the researcher herself. To deny this dialogue would be to deny the basic argument of this dissertation, which is that training in dance shapes a somatic culture practitioners use to make sense of their embodied experience. As a practitioner myself, I share this somatic culture. As Thomas (1993) has written in relation to her research among young women dancing in London, so I contend that my position in this research process as a practitioner has enabled rather than inhibited the acquisition of a deeper understanding of somatic experience. In fact, through Thomas' words, I also argue that:

Because of my dance background and my understanding of the difficulties of bringing the ideas about the experience of dancing into the domain of the verbal, I was able to empathise with the dancers' attempt to search for the appropriate words, to ask other

questions, or to participate in the discussions in such a way as to facilitate their talk. (1993: 76)

In fact, another problem with investigating embodied experience and knowledge is that this has to be accessed through verbal means such as language, for research and dissemination purposes. To translate somatic experience into words is reductive and challenging, as many of my interviewees also stated. However, the great majority of my informants found my questions relevant and gave me detailed answers, which went much beyond my initial input and interests and finally shaped the argument developed in this dissertation.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed through thematic codes. After identifying a number of recurrent and relevant concept-codes, I created a map, in which I tried to determine the relationships between the different themes touched during the interviews.



**FIG. 2: CONCEPTUAL MAP AND ANALYSIS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA**

Through this process of analysis, I was able to identify four main code-clusters, which have provided the basic structure of this dissertation:

- Identity: gender, ethnicity, hybridity, being or becoming Odia, the Odia way of moving or doing things.
- Somatic experience: distinction between understanding and doing, music, use of metaphors, becoming one and self-forgetfulness in performance.
- Dance aesthetics and ethos: importance of practice, self-discipline, becoming one's own master, movement quality, relationships between music and movement.
- Social relationships: guru-student, dancer-musician, performer-audience.

It was during the analysis of the interviews that I realised that there was a common thread running across all of these themes. I have drawn on this common discourse in shaping the basic argument discussed in these pages. In fact, in this dissertation I argue that somatic experience in Odissi is characterised by a rhetoric of self-transcendence. This rhetoric is associated with the ideal experience of the body and the mind in performance. The experience of self-transcendence is considered achievable only through a process of self-refinement, which corresponds to training. This basic argument was often articulated by practitioners in terms of becoming one or forgetting the self in performance.

Although I was acquainted with these discourses since the beginning of my fieldwork in India, my focus on the subjective experience of cognitive process and strategies of learning had eclipsed their importance and recurrence in dancers' somatic narratives. In this dissertation, I argue that this rhetoric is consistent with indigenous philosophical ideas about the self, introduced in the following section. However, while these indigenous ideas about the self, body and mind provide a framework for the material discussed in this work, my purpose in this dissertation is also to show that this rhetoric of self-transcendence is

interwoven with discourses of power related to gender identities, ethnicity and artistic expertise.

The experience of self-transcendence corresponds to the ideal experience of the body and the mind, which practitioners tended to distinguish from embodied experience in training. The identification of this common rhetoric shifted the focus of my writing from the cognitive dimensions of experiences, to more cultural significations of these experiences. This brought me to incorporate in my analysis of the data scholarship about Indian philosophy, in particular Rao's (1998, 2005, 2012a, b) work on the similarity between modern Western theories on embodied cognition and ancient Indian theories of the embodied mind.<sup>3</sup>

Equally influential has been the access to more anthropological studies about the self (Kasulis *et al.*, 1993; Koller, 1993; Menon, 2011, 2013a; Parish, 1994), personhood (Busby, 1997; Fowler, 2004; Lamb, 1997; Marriott, 1976), the body (Halliburton, 2002; Holdrege, 1998; Kakar, 1991; Michaels and Wulf, 2011), mind and consciousness (Hari, 2010; Rao, 2012a; Rosenthal, 1986; Schweizer, 1993; Shusterman, 2009; Zarrilli, 2011a), gender (MacIszowski, 2001; Mohanty, 2004; Mruthinti, 2006; Nanda, 1990, 2000), aesthetics (Higgins, 2007; Schechner, 2001; Schwartz, 2008), performance and religious behaviour (Haberman, 1985, 2001) in South Asian cultures. This body of literature is incorporated, critically discussed and used as theoretical framework in the relevant chapters of this dissertation.

Particularly important for the understanding of my data has been also Yuasa's (1993) writing on self-cultivation in eastern bodily disciplines. Although Yuasa establishes an

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<sup>3</sup> It is arguable that Rao's attempt to demonstrate that an embodied understanding of the mind was already present in ancient Indian philosophical traditions, such as Yoga, continues the colonial and post-colonial tradition of translating indigenous concepts into modern western-produced scientific categories. This translation aims to provide the Indian nation with its own modernity anchored in spiritual antiquity. See for example Van der Veer's (2009) analysis of Vivekananda's modernisation of Hinduism.

orientalist dichotomy between an imaginary East, which includes Chinese, Japanese and Indian philosophical traditions, and an equally imaginary West, which according to Yuasa cultivates the body separately from the mind, Yuasa's writings helped me reconstruct the cultural meanings dancers attributed to their embodied experience. In particular, Yuasa argues that:

the tradition of Eastern self-cultivation places importance on entering the mind from the body or form. That is, it attempts to train the mind by entering the body. (26)

Therefore, according to Yuasa, in eastern psychophysical disciplines, while focusing on the body, physical training actually works on the mind of the practitioners, with the purpose of 'perfecting the human spirit or enhancing one's personality' (3). In this sense, a physical practice becomes a process of self-refinement and self-cultivation, whose ultimate aim is to achieve an extraordinary experience of the ordinary self.

This extraordinary experience may acquire different cultural meanings, but somatically is perceived as a state of 'body-mind oneness', that is a 'state in which both the mind and body congeal into one' (Yuasa, 1993: 22). As Yuasa explains, in this state of body-mind oneness:

the movement of the mind and body become indistinguishable. It is a state of self-forgetfulness, in which consciousness of oneself as the subject of bodily movement disappears and becomes the movement itself that is dancing. (27)

A similar underlying rhetoric emerged as relevant in dancers' articulations of their somatic experience in dance. Fieldwork observations suggested that practitioners conceive training as a process that concerns the body as well as the mind, and through these eventually one's sense of self. The identification of this constant shifted my initial interest in the experience of the body and the mind towards an investigation of the sense of self in relation to the practice of dance. In this dissertation, I examine what the process of self-

refinement and the experience of body-mind oneness entail and how they are experienced and articulated by the practitioners themselves.

## 6. A METAPHOR FOR SOMATIC EXPERIENCE

The content of this dissertation is structured around the metaphor of 'layers'. Odissi dancers often use this metaphor to explain the process of learning and mastering the dance skills and of unfolding the meanings embedded in the movement and choreographic vocabulary. The way they use this metaphor reveals that learning is a two-way process in which one perfects the skills by at the same time adding and subtracting something. Through training, aesthetic layers are 'added' to the dancer's body, mind and sense of self, by way of 'refining' and 'polishing' this same individual dancer's body, mind and self. Hence, to learn dance is ideally to 'undress' one from his or her individual embodied identity, and to 'dress' one with the aesthetic identity, body, mind and self of the dance.

Dancers use the metaphor of layers to describe how they learn movement and choreographic material. For instance, Sonali Mishra, one of my informants, employed the term 'layer' to explain the process of learning a new dance item, by first focusing on the sequence and then on the details of the movements.

I find that, when I learn a new item, first I just want to know the sequence. And, after you have that framework, then you go back and start adding layers, layers and layers, and nuances of the movements.

Carolina Prada, a dancer from Colombia, explained the training process in similar terms, by saying:

Suppose that a teacher is able to embody the form in a complete way. Of course it requires lot of time. [...] You have to have lots of time, because it is like an onion. For you to be able to understand the small, small things, layers, layers, layers and layers....

Amanda Geroy, a dancer from USA, on the other hand, used the metaphor of layers to explain the interpretation of dramatic characters in pantomimic dance.

You have two layers: you have to have the proper Odissi technique, and over that you have to have whatever character you are doing, and that character is in a certain moment of time, in the text. Actually it is three things [layers] going on... and of course you are yourself, but you have to kind of erase that self.

Therefore, these layers that dancers mention in the articulations of their somatic experience are conceived as both an addition and a subtraction to one's body, mind and self. In fact, throughout this work, I argue that the training in Odissi is somatically experienced as a process of self-refinement, through which the aesthetic self of the performer is gradually 'shaped' by simultaneously concealing, if not virtually erasing, the individual self of the practitioner. In short, the metaphor of layers provides the practitioners with a powerful image through which to articulate their somatic experience in this aesthetic process.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have suggested, metaphors play a crucial role in understanding and giving meaning to the world we live in. They argue that the human conceptual system is mostly metaphorical and that metaphors are largely grounded in bodily experiences. In other words, although metaphors are linguistic devices, they are embodied in character. By suggesting that language is mostly embodied, that is to say grounded on bodily experiences, and that metaphors reveal the embodied character of language, Lakoff and Johnson's influential work relocates cognition, or the processes



through which human beings make sense of their experiences, from linguistic categorisation into the body.

Lakoff and Johnson's philosophical contribution also suggests that metaphors provide a gateway to somatic experience, allowing us to access, articulate and share it interpersonally through language. In fact, somatic experience often defies verbal articulation and probably resists, as Lakoff and Johnson say, a full comprehension. However:

Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetics experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. (1980: 193)

Metaphors help us to articulate experiences that resist articulation. They work not only on the verbal level, but also on the somatic level, that is on the level of how one perceives one's embodied self from within. They make possible the transmission of embodied skills, knowledge and experience. By working through ordinary categories, metaphors also allow us to have extraordinary experiences. As my informant Amanda Geroy put it:

I think what a metaphor does is to help us to go beyond our limitations. I have never been a tree, I have always been Amanda, but I have seen trees. So, if Amanda has particular limitations that the tree doesn't, if I can visualise or imagine myself as a tree, then I can experience something that I would not allow myself to really experience. It makes some leap in my learning.

As Amanda's words show, metaphors are not only verbal devices for sharing somatic experience, but also act on somatic experience making it richer and extraordinary. Therefore, metaphors are grounded in embodied experience, while they also shape it.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest, 'it is hard to distinguish the physical from the cultural basis of a metaphor, since the choice of one physical basis from among many possible ones has to do with cultural coherence' (19). Hence, according to Lakoff and Johnson, although

metaphors are normally grounded in the body, one needs to take into account that the body is 'always already' a cultural body, so that embodied experience and cultural meanings reproduce each other in a continuous dialogue and feedback process. Because they are grounded both in embodied experience and in cultural values, metaphors need always to be interpreted within the context in which they are produced (12). In particular, Lakoff and Johnson write:

Every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions. It can be misleading, therefore, to speak of direct physical experience as though there were some core of immediate experience, which we then 'interpret' in terms of our conceptual system. [...] It would be more correct to say that all experience is cultural through and through, that we experience our 'world' in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself. (57)

Lakoff and Johnson's contribution provides an important theoretical backdrop to my research, by suggesting that: (1) metaphors are an important tool through which human beings make sense of their experiences; (2) they are grounded in the living body, despite being articulated through verbal language; (3) they are culturally produced and provide an interpersonal and intercultural access to individual somatic experience. Therefore, with their argument, Lakoff and Johnson bring to the same level cognition, embodied experience, language, and cultural meanings and values, advocating their inextricable interrelation.

Drawing on these theoretical premises, in this dissertation, I examine how all these elements interact to shape somatic experience in the practice of Odissi, in a way that is culturally relevant but nevertheless transculturally accessible. In fact, metaphors play a crucial role in the practice of Odissi, becoming a sort of shared discourse that shapes and is shaped by the embodied experience of the dance. Metaphors provide insights into the cultural constructs of reality, while they are themselves cultural constructs.

Following Lakoff and Johnson, I suggest that metaphors not only structure our conceptual systems, but they are structured by our bodily experiences and by how these experiences are informed by cultural values. I argue that by interpreting metaphors in the light of culturally relevant meanings, it is possible to access, articulate and share, both verbally and somatically, embodied experience, where this would normally resist articulation.

In particular, I suggest that the metaphor of layers that Odissi practitioners often use in order to articulate their somatic experience in dance is consistent with culturally specific ideas about the body, mind and self. In fact, the way dancers articulate their somatic experience in training and performance is coherent with the views developed by the *Sāṅkhya-Yoga* philosophical tradition. Some of my informants explicitly referred to this tradition during the interview. However, I argue that the *Sāṅkhya-Yoga* tradition and Odissi dance are both informed by a similar understanding of the self, and that the categories formulated by the former system can help us disentangle somatic experience in the latter.

While in using indigenous categories in the interpretation of culturally specific experiences I am certainly inspired by Marriott's (1989) quest for a Hindu ethnosociology that would employ Hindu categories for interpreting Hindu social life, my view of cultural identities and meanings as dynamic and fluid makes me sceptical about viewing this cultural life as defined by some form of cultural essentialism. Hence, Hindu categories are relevant to me in that they help me to explain in a more thorough way certain experiences and practices, which, although culturally constructed, are nevertheless sharable and transmissible beyond the cultural context in which they originate.

Building on these epistemological premises, I have structured the content of this dissertation using the metaphor of layers as a conceptual framework. Transforming the content into the form, I use this metaphor to articulate and share dancers' somatic experience, as dancers have used it to share their somatic experience with me. In the

following section, I introduce the categories of body, mind, and self, as they are conceived in Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy and as long as they are relevant to the understanding of embodied experience in Odissi. Then, I explain how the metaphor of layers has helped me to interpret dancers' somatic experience and eventually to organise, articulate and share this somatic experience in this dissertation.

## 7. THE EMBODIED SELF: PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS

### READINGS

The metaphor of layers that informs the somatic experience of Odissi dance is used in Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy to describe the condition of the embodied self, that is the individual self, living in the world. Sāṅkhya and Yoga are deemed to be amongst the oldest systems of Indian philosophy (Raja 1963 in Rao, 2005: 10). Although there are a few differences between the two traditions, Sāṅkhya and Yoga are often taken together in that they share the same epistemological and metaphysical assumptions (Kumar, 1984).<sup>4</sup>

According to the Sāṅkhya-Yoga system 'there are two kinds of entities - *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, spirit and matter' (Sastry 1993 in Rao, 2005: 11). *Puruṣa* is pure consciousness or self, while *prakṛti* is the principle governing the physical world, the body or, generally speaking, matter. The former is conscious, formless and changeless, whereas the latter is unconscious, subject to endless transformations, and takes the forms of the material world.

According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, the combination of the Supreme Self, *Puruṣa*, with matter, *Prakṛti*, generates different individual embodied selves and the variety of life on earth. The individual self is considered 'imprisoned' within the body and awaiting 'liberation'. More

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<sup>4</sup> As Dasgupta (1973) has argued, Sāṅkhya and Yoga have different views on philosophical, ethic and practical issues, although they share the same metaphysics.

precisely, the individual self, *puruṣa*, is enclosed within several layers, *kośas*, of bodily matter, *prakṛti*. This bodily matter includes both gross and subtle body. The gross body is the physical body in the strict sense, while the subtle body could be defined as the 'cognitive or mental body', the individual's mind. Gross and subtle bodies are distinct and yet continuous, in that they are both made of matter although one kind of matter is more refined than the other.

The subtle body presents three main forms or capacities: *manas*, *ahaṅkāra* and *buddhi*. These three categories articulate different degrees of consciousness the mind can achieve. According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, thanks to its refined nature, the subtle body achieves consciousness by 'reflecting' the conscious quality of *puruṣa*. *Manas* is often translated in English as 'mind': however unlike the western idea of mind, *manas* is physical and unconscious. *Manas* cannot be equated to the brain either, in that it is characterised by non-locality (Rao, 2005: 26). For this reason, *manas*, and in general the subtle body, is able to survive death and re-incarnate into another gross body. Rao (2005) has argued that, according to Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy, 'the mind collects information by processing the inputs it receives' (26).

*Ahaṅkāra* is often translated in English as self-awareness (Koller, 1993) or ego-maker (Jakubczak, 2008). *Ahaṅkāra* is the subtle body's capacity to recognise one's body and mind as being one's own and thus as belonging to the individual self. At this level, experience is subjectively understood, which means that it is recognised as pertaining to the 'I'. Finally, *buddhi* corresponds to the individual's ability to act on the physical world, including subtle and gross matter, with the purpose of 'affecting' it. Therefore, *buddhi* 'is not only an instrument but an agent as well' (Kumar, 1984: 17). 'Perception, memory, differentiation, reasoning, right knowledge, decision belong properly to mind', intended as *buddhi* (Dasgupta, 1973: 53). *Buddhi* is intentional, in that it always has a content, and volitional, in

that it can act as an agent in order to guide, transform and control the cognitive processes and the gross body itself. In short, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga ontology, unlike traditional western views, conceives both the body and the mind as being material, in contrast to the immateriality of the self. The mind is embodied, although characterised by different degrees of consciousness.

According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, the subtle body is determined by the memories of previous lives. Because of its subtle but still physical and changing nature, the mind is always wandering. The practical exercises used in Yoga include postural (*āsanas*), breathing (*prāṇāyāma*) and concentration (*saṃyama*) techniques, and are meant to stabilise the erratic mind. The postures in Yoga 'have to be "steady" in the same way that the mind has to be steady' (Sarukkai, 2002: 467). Similarly, breathing exercises are there to prepare the subject for concentration, the most advanced and difficult amongst the practical techniques proposed by Yoga.

The first level of concentration consists in focusing one's attention to a particular object. With the advancement of this technique 'the mind becomes steady in repeating the object of its concentration' (Dasgupta, 1973: 148). In this state of meditation the subject becomes conscious of the difference between the self and the object of concentration. Finally, the state of *samādhi* is reached when the mind becomes 'one with an object by a process of acute concentration upon it' (Dasgupta, 1973: 155). In this state one is able to transcend the sense of being an individual embodied self.

According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, and in general to most Hindu philosophical traditions, the ultimate purpose of life is to achieve liberation, *mokṣa*, from the cycle of re-births and hence from the body, in both its gross and subtle forms. By achieving liberation from the body, the individual's embodied self is able to join the super-individual Supreme Self, often identified with God. This liberation can be acquired through a process of self-refinement, or

*saṃskāra*. The practical exercises proposed by Yoga are meant to accelerate this process of self-refinement, by disciplining the body and the mind of the practitioner.

While the Yoga practitioner seeks, through specific psychophysical practices, ultimate liberation, other psychophysical techniques, when correctly followed and executed, are deemed to grant the practitioner with a provisional ‘taste of liberation’, or a transitory state of ‘body-mind oneness’, as Yuasua has defined it. This is the case with some performing and martial arts (Zarrilli, 1990, 2011a, b). Through these psychophysical techniques that work on both subtle and gross body, one is able to undergo a process of self-refinement and eventually to transcend his or her individual identity, body and mind. In this state of body-mind oneness, the individual self is momentarily forgotten.

The Sāṅkhya-Yoga system and Odissi dance share a similar understanding of body, mind, self, and the ultimate purpose of practice. These similarities could be summarised as follows: (1) body and mind are distinct and yet contiguous: they are both material although one is gross and the other is subtle matter and they depend upon and affect each other; (2) the mind is always material and as such embodied, although it is characterised by different degrees or forms of consciousness (the minimal consciousness of *manas*, the self-consciousness of *ahaṅkāra*, and the volitional and intentional consciousness of *buddhi*); (3) the training is psychophysical in that it works simultaneously on both the body and the mind of the practitioner; (4) the training is conceived as a process of refinement of one’s body and mind, and therefore self; (5) this process of self-refinement that the training entails consists in ideally ‘peeling off’ layers of one’s individual body and mind; (6) through this process of self-refinement one is eventually able to achieve liberation, intended as a state of body-mind oneness.

The Sāṅkhya-Yoga categories of the embodied self, awaiting liberation and union with God through a process of self-refinement, inform the practice of dance in a more direct way

through the reference to the *bhakti* tradition. The bhakti tradition, which provides a specific religious reading of the Sāṅkhya-Yoga existential and spiritual philosophy, underpins Indian classical performing arts. It does so both explicitly through the use of literary material, namely poetic texts, and implicitly through the promotion of values, such as committed practice, or *sādhana*, and surrendering, or *prapatti*, which characterise also the devotional movement known as Bhakti.<sup>5</sup>

The word bhakti originates in the Sanskrit term '*bhaj*' which means 'to share', 'to participate' (Singh, 1991) and it is generally translated as devotion. More specifically, the term bhakti is used to refer to a religious movement that developed and spread all over India during the Middle Ages (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century CE), although elements, that were later on taken to characterise it, can be found already in Vedic hymns (from 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE) (Pande, 1982). This spiritual movement is based on 'henoteism' or 'the belief in individual gods alternatively regarded as the highest' (Müller cited in Singh, 1991: 66). Hence, bhakti is absolute devotion towards a favourite god, without denying the existence of other divine entities.

The devotee or *bhakta* addresses and relates to the deity in a personal way, as one would do with his or her lover, parent or friend. The relationship between devotee and deity is intimate and direct, and often articulated in terms of erotic love. In fact, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga idea of mokṣa or liberation of the individual self from the cycle of rebirths and its consequent union with the Supreme Self, puruṣa, is metaphorically intended in the bhakti tradition as a union, indeed often an erotic union, between the human being, conceived as female, and the God, conceived as male.

Similarly to what the Sāṅkhya-Yoga argues about the individual self, the bhakta is able to join the Supreme Self by undergoing a process of self-refinement. This process, initially

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<sup>5</sup> See Layer I for further discussion of how these values inform the practice of Odissi and dancers' embodied experience.



formulated by the medieval theologian Rūpa Gosvāmin and called *rāgānugā bhakti sādhanā* (Haberman, 2001), consists of the devotee personifying a mythological character closely related to the God, such as his lover, parent or friend, in order to eventually reach God himself. The personification and embodiment of the mythological character is a gradual process through which one forgets one's own identity and becomes the character able to unite with the deity. As discussed more in detail in the last chapter of this dissertation, the *rāgānugā bhakti sādhanā* established by Rūpa Gosvāmin uses a dramatic practice to achieve spiritual goals, resulting in the overlap of aesthetics and spirituality, which characterises the practice of Indian classical dances even nowadays.

Although the bhakta can worship any Hindu god or goddess, the medieval development of the bhakti movement is mostly associated to the cult of Lord Viṣṇu, in particular in his form as Lord Kṛṣṇa, one of Viṣṇu's ten incarnations. The devotion towards Kṛṣṇa has inspired a great amount of poetic and artistic production especially during the Middle Ages, but it is still nowadays an important component of religious behaviour in India. Most of the bhakti texts on Kṛṣṇa and his *rasalīlā*, or cosmic play, which were written both in Sanskrit and in other local languages, are still a powerful source of inspiration for performing artists and explicitly used in the pantomimic items of the dance repertoire.

The *rasalīlā* is the mythological amorous play that Lord Kṛṣṇa is thought to have entertained with the thousand maidens of Vrindavana, a village in which Kṛṣṇa spent his youth. The bhakti poetry especially focuses on the troubled love story of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, his favourite among all the milkmaids of Vrindavana. Rādhā's longing for union with the God is frustrated by acts of betrayal, jealousy and quivering anticipation, providing an intense portrayal of human emotions. One of the most influential among the texts that have sealed this story in refined poetry is the *Gīta Govinda*, a medieval poem written by the Viṣṇu devotee Jayadeva. As discussed throughout this dissertation, and more systematically in the

last chapter, the bhakti tradition, and through this the philosophy of longing for a state of completeness of the self, achieved through a process of disciplined refinement of one's body and mind, informs the practice of Odissi, overlapping aesthetic with spiritual and existential goals. Although somatic experience in Yoga practices, in the rāgānugā bhakti sādhanā and in Odissi cannot be conflated, if only because these three systems have quite different immediate purposes and requirements, the categories of the Sāṅkhya-Yoga and the values that underpin the bhakti devotional movement elucidate somatic experience in Odissi, as I will discuss in the following chapters, particularly in Layer II.

## 8. STRUCTURE OF THE WORK

As anticipated above, the outcomes of my research are here organised in 'layers'. However, it is worth clarifying that the layers of this dissertation do not strictly reflect the Sāṅkhya-Yoga organisation of the kośas, or sheaths around the self, although they do so in part. I rather use this organisation in layers as a metaphor through which to articulate dancers' somatic experience. Thus, I present my argument proceeding from the outer layer gradually moving towards the centre, where the self is deemed to lie. My purpose, in doing so, is to reflect through the form of my writing different aspects of the embodied experience in the practice of Odissi dance.

In Layer V, *Contexts*, I introduce the ethnographic field in which this research was carried out, discussing how this affected the outcome of my investigation. I also review literature on Odissi and Indian classical performing arts in order to provide an historical and anthropological background to the practice of the dance. I mention issues of national and regional identity as they are relevant to my argument and as they allow me to contextualise

this research. This chapter ends with a description of the choreographic and movement vocabulary of the dance, as it is performed nowadays.

In Layer IV, *Identities*, I look at how social identities and, in particular, gender identities are constructed and experienced through the practice of dance. I argue that the first level of the dance training consists in ‘deconstructing’ the individual self, by constructing or shaping an aesthetic, performative and gendered self, which is the self of the performer. Building on previous anthropological studies on Odia society, in particular on the work of Usha Menon (2013b), I examine how dancers experience culturally defined gender identities, roles and relationships in the practice of dance. I analyse specific elements and aspects of the Odissi movement vocabulary and traditional choreographic repertoire, in order to show how certain cultural values are embedded in and embodied through the practice, form and content of the dance. The chapter ends with a section in which, following the phenomenological articulations of my informants, I argue that the embodiment of the movement vocabulary in terms of gender identities and relationships is experienced by dancers as a positive psychophysical empowerment and self-cultivation.

In Layer III, *Bodies*, I examine how Odissi practitioners experience their bodies in dance. The ‘body’ that I take into account corresponds to the Sāṅkhya-Yoga gross body or the outer, more material, layer within which the conscious self is deemed to lie. I propose that, through training, the gross body undergoes a process of refinement through which the individual body of the practitioner is shaped as the aesthetic ‘dividual’ (Marriott, 1989) and relational body of the performer. The transformation that the body undergoes is, after the construction of the gendered social body of the performer, another important level of the process of self-cultivation that the training in Odissi entails.

In Layer II, *Minds*, I discuss how Odissi practitioners experience and articulate the role of the mind, or Sāṅkhya-Yoga’s subtle body, in the practice of dance. In particular, I look at

how mental processes are related to physical processes. Thus, I examine the subjective experience of body-mind relationships in the practice of dance. I suggest that this experience is characterised by a tension between training and performance, where training encourages a distinction between physical and mental processes and capacities, while a performance is considered truly successful if the performer is able to reach a state of 'body-mind oneness' (Yuasa, 1993). I also suggest that the relationships between body and mind are experienced as characterised by different forms of consciousness and I examine the practices that enable or hinder these forms of consciousness and the culturally specific discourses that give meaning to these experiences. Finally, I look at the role that music has, according to Odissi dancers, in the experience of body-mind relationships.

In the last chapter, Layer I, *Selves*, I look at the experience of self in relation to the practice of dance. I suggest that dancers experience the training as a process of self-refinement whose purpose is the achievement of an extraordinary experience of the self, sometimes identified with a sense of self-forgetfulness or self-transcendence. I argue that Odissi practitioners ascribe spiritual meanings to their artistic endeavour because the dance practice and the vocabulary are informed by values that have a spiritual character in the specific cultural context in which they initially emerged. In particular, I suggest that these values underpin the spiritual movement known as Bhakti. In this chapter, I look at how these culturally specific spiritual values inform the practice of dance and dancers' embodied experience.

Throughout this dissertation I suggest that embodied experience in the practice of Odissi is informed by culturally specific values and meanings. These values and meanings concern ideas about identity, body, mind and, in general, sense of self. In these pages, I argue that, despite being associated with a specific cultural context, these ideas are transculturally embodied through dance practices and discourses. This means that they are 'embodied' or

deeply acquired also by subjects who do not consider themselves as belonging to the dance's original context. In this work, I examine the terms dancers use to articulate their somatic experience and I analyse the practices and discourses that support and give meaning to their experiences in a culturally relevant way.

In general, I suggest that embodied experience in Odissi is informed by the idea that training is a process of self-refinement, which, if correctly carried out, allows the practitioner to achieve an experience of self-transcendence or self-forgetfulness in performance. Therefore, embodied experience in Odissi is characterised by a tension between training and performance. Training is a 'transformative' process that operates on different levels, shaping one's identity, body, mind, and sense of self. Performance is ideally the accomplishment of this transformative process.



## LAYER V: *CONTEXTS*

### OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter, I provide an ethnographic, historical and choreographic account of Odissi dance vocabulary and practices with special reference to the contexts in which I carried out my research. The chapter is arranged in three parts. In the first part, sections 1 to 4, I introduce the two ethnographic sites where I did my fieldwork, highlighting their peculiarities especially in terms of teaching contexts and strategies, dance vocabularies and performative practices. In the second part, sections 5 and 6, I draw on previous studies in the area and on my own fieldwork observations, to critically retrace the emergence of Odissi as a classical dance form and its relation to colonial and postcolonial narratives. In the third part of the chapter, sections 7 to 9, I provide an overall picture of the movement and choreographic vocabulary of Odissi, as practiced and performed in the two ethnographic contexts in which I carried out my research.

### 1. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out both in New Delhi and in Bhubaneswar (Odisha), over approximately fifteen months, between Spring 2010 and

Summer 2012.<sup>6</sup> As part of my fieldwork, I undertook intensive training in Odissi, attending group classes, as well as receiving private tuitions. I also lived and interacted on a daily basis with other Odissi practitioners, learning dance, attending and giving performances, exchanging opinions and feelings, as well as sharing most of my free time with them. As a practitioner myself, I used my own body to 'acquire' cultural knowledge through what Samudra (2008) calls 'thick participation'.

Thick participation is, thus, cultural knowledge recorded first in the anthropologist's body and only later externalised as visual or textual data for purposes of analysis. (667)

If, through 'thick participation', I was able to develop an empathic understanding of dancers' embodied experience, throughout the research process I was also always preoccupied with systematically evaluating my own subjective experience of the dance. In addition, by carrying out my fieldwork in India, I was able to relate discourses, practices and experiences about dance to the wider socio-cultural context in which they were taking place.

As part of my fieldwork, I also interviewed nineteen Odissi practitioners. These key informants were identified among the people who were attending the dance classes I was also attending, or who were suggested to me by other dancers, on the basis of their knowledge and experience. In general, in choosing my key informants I strove to reflect the diversity of people engaged nowadays in the practice of Odissi, with special reference to the two locations in which I carried out my research. Therefore, my key informants covered a wide range in terms of age (from 20 to 60 years old), stage of training (from beginners to acclaimed performers and gurus), and degree of commitment to the dance practice (from amateurs to professional practitioners).

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<sup>6</sup> In particular, I spent eleven months in New Delhi and four in Bhubaneswar, initially in April 2010 and then between December 2011 and March 2012.



Only two of my key informants were men: one was Ratikant Mohapatra, son of the legendary Odissi guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and guru himself, and the other, Surjit Nongmeikapam, was a young dancer who had studied Odissi for approximately a month, as part of his contemporary dance training. This limited number of male informants reflects the fact that the great majority of the students who attended the classes I was also attending, were female. It also reflects the widespread belief that Odissi is a very feminine form of dance, and as such it is more suitable to women than to men.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of nationality, ten of my informants were Indian citizens, while the others were foreigners coming from the USA, Colombia, Japan, Poland, Mexico and Italy. Some of these foreign practitioners had been permanently based in India. Similarly, most of my Indian informants had been regularly travelling or living abroad for teaching and performing, as well as for other personal reasons. In particular, six of my informants were originally from Odisha (Ratikant Mohapatra, Sujata Mohapatra, Kavita Dwibedi, Sonali Mishra, Priyambada Pattnaik, Ipsita Behoora). Of these six, three were living in New Delhi (Priyambada Pattnaik, Kavita Dwibedi), one was born from Odia parents but had been raised in the USA (Sonali Mishra), and two were travelling abroad on a regular basis (Ratikant and Sujata Mohapatra). Six of my informants were foreigners who had been living in India for at least three years (Carolina Prada, Ania Pienieck, Amanda Geroy, Marcela Palomo) or were permanently based there (Ileana Citaristi, Sharon Lowen). Five of my informants were brought up elsewhere in India (Deeksha Sharma, Kumkum Lal, Moushumi Joshi, Anandita Banerjee, Surjit Nongmeikapam, Radhika Samson). A Japanese dancer, who asked me to maintain anonymity, had also been living in New Delhi for five years and told me that learning dance was for her a way of knowing and understanding Indian culture.

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<sup>7</sup> However, in Odisha there are several male dancers and gurus, while in New Delhi most active dancers and gurus are female.

By involving in my research people who were very diverse in terms of age, expertise and above all nationality, I wanted to investigate to what extent the dance practice was 'shaping' their embodied experience and to what extent these subjects were considered or considered themselves as belonging to the same cultural framework. Indeed, such a specific direction in my research was suggested by the actual conditions I was exposed to during my fieldwork. In fact, after spending several months in New Delhi, sharing my dance classes with practitioners from all over India and from abroad, I moved to Odisha for further research, expecting, perhaps ingenuously, that there I would have come into contact mostly with local Odia practitioners. However, I found myself surrounded again by a majority of non-Odia people.<sup>8</sup>

Faced with this scenario, I found it problematic to ascribe my informants to specific national, ethnic and, above all, cultural categories, in spite of the fact that these categories are often at stake in dancers' daily practices and discourses. In fact, I programmatically started to question the meanings categories such as Odia and non-Odia acquired for the practitioners and I started to reflect on the extent discourses about ethnicity, nationality and culture are constructed and embodied through the practice of dance. In particular, sharing my life with other practitioners, I realised that, whether they defined themselves Odia or not, most of them showed a similar understanding of embodied experience. Consequently, in this research I suggest that dance training, discourses and practices 'construct' a distinctive way of understanding and articulating embodied experience, which is at the same time culturally informed and transculturally accessible.

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<sup>8</sup> This scenario reflects the specific context in which I carried out my research. In fact, when I went to Odisha for the second time (2011-12), all the senior local Odia dancers I had met in 2010 had married and had left, permanently or temporarily, the school and the company. At the time of my fieldwork (2011-12), dance classes with local junior company members were held in the evening, in sessions separate from those I and other non-local practitioners were allowed to attend.

## 2. EMBODYING DIFFERENCES

This research was carried out in two sites, New Delhi, where I joined the Odissi classes held in Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, a college for training in Indian classical music and dance, and Bhubaneswar, Odisha, where I joined the classes set by Srjan, one of the leading school in Odissi training. Although my fieldwork observations focused on the training process taking place in these two schools, I also visited other dance teachers, performers and students who were practicing outside of these institutions and sometimes had slightly different styles. I also attended performances, shared views with other Odissi practitioners and attended public lecture- demonstrations in which well-know gurus and performers talked about issues related to Odissi dance aesthetics and practice.

While in New Delhi Odissi is one dance style among many others, Bhubaneswar is considered the capital of Odissi and for local people to learn dance mean, without many alternative, to learn Odissi. Due to the interest and commitment in learning Odissi among a growing number of foreign practitioners, who are willing to travel and spend months living in India near their guru to absorb the technique and the aesthetics of this performing art, Odissi dance has become also a very lucrative activity causing a mushrooming of private schools and gurus who attempts to increase the number of their foreign attendees. In fact, Odissi has become, together with local archaeological sites related to the dance thanks to their freezes and decorations, a crucial touristic resource for the state of Odisha. However, this activity is mainly concentrated in the capital Bhubaneswar, where one can find an incredible number of Odissi schools or teachers.

In New Delhi, Odissi classes are held in schools or colleges, which offer training in other different dance styles and performing arts. The training is generally less intensive as facilities are used for other purposes, and dancers are often involved in other activities,

such as education or work. Although there are a few schools which provide intensive professional training, most of Odissi dancers from abroad as well as from other parts of India prefer to spend a few months in a school in Odisha, as this is considered the place where Odissi originates and maintains its pure form, degenerating as it reaches the big urban centres such as New Delhi and Mumbai.

Following this path, in April 2010, I went to Odisha to undertake intensive dance training under Sujata Mohapatra at Srjan. Srjan was established in 1993 in Bhubaneswar by the legendary guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. I continued my studies in New Delhi, at Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, under a scholarship granted by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Odissi classes in Shri Ram were taught by Priyambada Pattnaik, an Odia woman who had moved to the capital after marrying, and who, in spite of her life-long training in Odissi and her unequivocal talent both as a performer and as a teacher, eschewed the appellation of guru because of her relatively young age, her gender and her marginal profile in the contemporary Odissi scene, a situation she attributed to lack of fortune, rather than to lack of social network, economic power and support from her family.

Priyambada Pattnaik had learned Odissi with different gurus in Odisha, finally completing her training at Nrityagram, a famous residential school on the outskirts of Bangalore, organised according to the traditional training system known as *gurukula*.<sup>9</sup> According to this system of knowledge transmission, students live in the same building with their master and dedicate all their time to dance training, offering in exchange *sevā*, or service to their teacher, through small chores, such as gardening, cleaning the house or washing clothes.

Nrityagram was founded in 1990 by Protima Gauri Bedi, a disciple of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. However, the gurus teaching nowadays in Nrityagram are often criticised, especially by established Odia performers and teachers, for having tainted the 'purity' of

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<sup>9</sup> For more details on the gurukula system see Chatterjea (1996b).

the guru Kelucharan style, by 'modifying' his 'original' movement and choreographic vocabulary and by introducing training in other movement practices, such western dance or south Indian martial arts, into the school curriculum. These critiques are grounded in the belief, widespread among Indian classical dance practitioners, that an individual who trains in more than one movement discipline will never be a 'perfect' and 'genuine' interpreter of any of them. This belief is further supported by the argument that each classical dance style has its own distinctive movement quality and its way of using the body, according to precise visual geometries and kinetic rules.

For instance, through training, Odissi dancers learn to contain the movements of their limbs within a restricted kinesphere, by not stretching their arms and legs beyond a certain point, something that is required in Bharatanatyam (Priyambada Pattnaik, interview).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the 'sharpness' that, according to many Odissi dancers, characterises the movement vocabularies of Kathak and Bharatanatyam is deemed to 'spoil' the resilience, smoothness and sweetness of Odissi.<sup>11</sup> In fact, according to dancers, after several years of training, the body tends to move 'automatically', disclosing knowledge and qualities that may belong to other choreographic idioms and that spoil the purity of a certain style. Similar claims also concern foreign practitioners' interpretation of the dance vocabulary. In fact, according to these claims, as I will discuss in Layer IV, foreign bodies cannot avoid revealing, although often unconsciously and automatically, the ultimate 'inauthenticity' of their interpretation.

The Odissi movement vocabulary that Priyambada Pattnaik taught me during my training in New Delhi was, in fact, very similar to the one I learned in Srjan, as they are both derived

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<sup>10</sup> Bharatanatyam and Kathak are two other classical dance styles respectively attributed to South and North Indian performing arts tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Odissi dancers from the older generation often complain against the aesthetic changes that Odissi dance vocabulary has undergone especially in the last years. They often label these changes with the term 'bharatanatysation'. This term refers to the acquisition of sharpness in the aesthetic quality of Odissi, as well as to a preference for faster and complex rhythmic footwork sequences, against the old 'typical Odissi charm and sweetness' (e.g. Kumkum Lal, interview).

from the same guru Kelucharan Mohapatra style.<sup>12</sup> However, between the two schools there are small differences that concern both the technique and the choreographic items. When I undertook my training in Odisha, these differences were presented to me mostly in terms of degree, for example as a more exaggerated torso deflection in the *tribhaṅga* stance or protruding of the pelvis area in the *cauka* stance both of them emphasised in Srjan,<sup>13</sup> or as a greater distance between feet in the basic *cauka* position emphasised by my teacher in New Delhi.

The differences between styles and specific schools of training can hardly be noticed by the inexpert eye. In fact, they are often articulated in terms of nuances. However, dancers in India consider it inconceivable to train under different gurus at the same time and even to change guru without a serious reason. This is because, by changing guru, one is often 'forced' to literally 're-order' her dancing body, as my informant Sonali Mishra put it.<sup>14</sup> In fact, these differences in movement and choreographic vocabulary, that appear at first subtle, often require the dancer to 'disavow' what she has been learning under a teacher, in order to acquire the style of the new one. This is particularly true when one passes from one guru to another of higher prestige, let alone from a slightly different dance style. Therefore, the training is such that dancers often experience the transition from one guru to another as a form of rupture with a way of moving, that in part or as a whole is denied to the body of the practitioner, in order to acquire a new way of moving.

When I returned to Odisha, during Winter 2011-12, after having trained for more than one year with Priyambada Pattnaik in New Delhi, I was myself the object of this process of 'deconstruction' and 'reconstruction' that the body of the practitioner undergoes when training under different gurus or when passing from a guru to another. In the same way,

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<sup>12</sup> See later in this chapter for details on the different Odissi styles, attributed to the four main gurus who, in the 50s, systematised the dance's movement vocabulary.

<sup>13</sup> *Tribhaṅga* and *cauka* are the two main and distinctive stances of Odissi dance. See later in this chapter for a more detailed description of these two stances.

<sup>14</sup> I will discuss this point in Layer III.

when, after three months, I went back to New Delhi to complete my training in Shri Ram College, I noticed that the teacher there would not give me feedback or corrections, and in fact would not treat me as her student any more. Finally, a few months later, Priyambada Pattnaik asked me to end the training under her tutelage and to continue with Sujata Mohapatra. I experienced this rupture as being inscribed in my body and in the way I was dancing, which marked an embodied difference between me and the rest of the students in the class. In addition, for Priyambada to correct me would have also meant to question the teaching of someone she considered more experienced than her. My dancing body belonged already to someone else.

Therefore, during my research, I had the chance not only to undergo rigorous training under a guru, but also to experience the embodied 'disorientation' and 'reorientation' that often marks the transitions from a guru to another. This has allowed me to understand how teachers 'possess' and 'control', although in a subtle way, the body of their students. Thus, through the training process, the dancer's body becomes a field within which issues of power and control are articulated in terms of dance technique and choreography.

### 3. LIVING IN CONTEXT

While Srjan is organised as a professional and full-time dance school, exclusively devoted to Odissi training and oriented towards preparing students for performance,<sup>15</sup> Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra is a college for music and dance, where children and young people, predominantly girls and boys of the city's middle and upper classes, undertake training in

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<sup>15</sup> Although, when I did my fieldwork in Srjan, classes were going on all day, local pupils would join only in the afternoon and certainly not on a regular basis. Most of them in fact were going to school or, in the case of the more grown up ones, working in some small local business. The school however had a few local resident students under a scholarship scheme, who were joining the morning classes, together with other visiting and permanent based Indian and foreign practitioners.

classical performing arts without necessarily aspiring to be professionals. Indeed, some of the policies set by the institution clearly hinder a full artistic growth of both teachers and students.<sup>16</sup>

This situation affects the content and the way the training is carried out. In fact, whereas in Srjan training focuses on learning the very basic technique immediately followed by full choreographic items, in Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, more importance is put memorising the names of the many elements of the dance vocabulary and on learning the dance technique independently from the choreographic items.

Shri Ram College offers classes in Hindustani instrumental and vocal music, in Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi, and has an open company engaged in regularly choreographing and staging ballets based on Hindu traditional mythology.<sup>17</sup> During my fieldwork in New Delhi, Odissi classes were held thrice a week, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons, from 4pm to 7pm. The classes were divided into three sessions of one hour each, respectively for beginner, intermediate and advanced pupils. Although a distinction among students based on the level of training exists and is openly acknowledged, in practice senior students are expected or at least advised to join the lower level classes, in order to maintain their stamina and to continue polishing their basic technique. During my fieldwork, Odissi classes were attended by approximately thirty pupils during the first hour, by less than ten during the second, and by the two most senior students during the third and last hour. The age of the students in those classes ranged from approximately 8 to 32 years old.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, gurus are not allowed to teach anywhere else, give private classes, or perform without the permission of the College Principal. A similar policy applies to students as well. It is clear that in a highly competitive and poorly rewarding art world, these regulations hamper the economical and social growth of the performing artists.

<sup>17</sup> This kind of groups and ballets are often defined in New Delhi as 'contemporary', on the basis that they depart from the classical languages in order to use them creatively. In Odisha, where there is not a sound tradition of any form of contemporary or experimental dance, the adjective contemporary is used in a denigrating sense to refer to Bollywood dance or to any kind of fusion between different styles. For a more detailed analysis of these issues, see Lopez y Royo (2003).



The studio where Odissi classes were held had mirrors on the two lateral walls, but students were expected to use them only for individual practice, before or at the end of the group class. Most of the time students would dance facing forwards towards the guru, who used to sit on the floor, her legs crossed, giving instructions, imparting corrections and keeping time by striking a stick against the floor or against a small wooden board. The classes were regularly accompanied by a male *pakhāvaj* player<sup>18</sup> who, despite being a musician and not a dancer, would often give instructions to the students and would take control over the teaching process, making use of his gender and his seniority to override the role of the dance teacher.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, due to the scope and nature of the institution, the limited hours available for supervised training, the number and the great variety in terms of both age and expertise of the students attending the sessions, and last but not least the dynamics of power that used to influence the transmission process, the teacher was rarely able to provide individual feedback. On the contrary, students were often left to rely on their own understanding and sense of commitment to the dance in order to achieve important improvements.

The guru would normally correct the students' performance only through verbal comments, while sitting and looking at the whole group and by using from time to time someone's name to make a specific or a general remark. She would hardly demonstrate something more than once and would often leave to the senior students the 'responsibility' to act as a model for the juniors, by providing them with an embodied example of the dance.

This way of teaching and learning, by continuously giving and receiving verbal feedback, is in fact very common in the practice of Odissi, and allows the student to develop a thorough

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<sup>18</sup> The *pakhāvaj* is a double-headed drum used to accompany Odissi dance.

<sup>19</sup> Such dynamics of power are indeed normal in India, especially in the field of the performing arts. See Clayton and Leante (2012). See also later in this work (in particular Layer IV and Layer II) for a discussion on how gender relations inform the practice of dance and practitioners' embodied experience.

understanding of the aesthetics of the dance, even before being actually able to dance correctly.

In fact, as I will discuss in Layer II, students are expected to use this understanding during their own individual practice in order to develop the dance skills. At the same time, this way of teaching and learning dance, that greatly employs verbal transmission, has from the point of view of the researcher the advantage of revealing and articulating part of the somatic experience of the dance that would otherwise remain 'silent' within the 'bodymind' of the practitioner.

As anticipated in the Introduction, a great part of my understanding of the embodied experience of dance is derived from a careful and critical examination of the verbal and somatic feedback that teachers would often give in the class and that dancers would often share among each other, when practicing or speaking about dance. Indeed, most of the training in Odissi consists of working through the comments given by the guru, during individual and self-directed practice.

The corrections and instructions that the guru gives to the students are clearly not only verbal. In fact, during my training in Odisha, Sujata Mohapatra used to demonstrate the movements herself more than once and frequently employed 'hands-on' explanations. For instance, she used to apply pressure to certain points of the student's body with the purpose of communicating the sense of gravity required by the aesthetics of the dance, or with the purpose of adjusting the position of the student's limbs.



**FIG. 3: SUJATA MOHAPATRA (ON THE LEFT) TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH TOUCH TO THE AUTHOR (CENTRE)  
(BY IGNACIO MORENO)**



**FIG. 4: SUJATA MOHAPATRA TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH TOUCH (BY IGNACIO MORENO)**

This 'hands-on' technique, although not common,<sup>20</sup> allows the student to acquire and process embodied information in a faster and more accurate way. Thanks to this and similar mechanisms, embodied knowledge passes through physical, although controlled contact, from the body of the teacher to that of the student, allowing the practitioner to transform information given 'from without' into a 'feeling from within'.



**FIG. 5: SUJATA MOHAPATRA TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH DEMONSTRATION (BY IGNACIO MORENO)**

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<sup>20</sup> It is arguable that physical contact is often avoided because of issues of purity and ideas of contamination that govern interpersonal relations in traditional Indian society. However, often working with international students, Sujata Mohapatra employs this hands-on strategy. For a more general discussion of the concept of 'purity' see Douglas (1966) and for an examination of 'purity' specific to Indian society see Carman & Apffel-Marglin (1985).

Srjan, the second main location of my dance training and ethnographic fieldwork, is one of the most famous Odissi schools in Bhubaneswar and, while offering evening classes to local students, gains most of its income from international practitioners. Many foreign students regularly travel to Odisha in order to carry out intensive training in dance. Most of these foreign students spend from one to three months, sometimes as much as one year or more, learning and practicing dance all day long, and attending the performances that take place in the local area.

Srjan does not have a strictly defined class schedule. However, classes and rehearsals generally take place every day of the week. Students are required to live within the premises of the school or at walking distance, in order to be able to join the classes at any moment of the day. In fact, the time of the classes is fixed day by day and it can easily change at very short notice. While this system greatly limits students' mobility and freedom to make any kind of independent decision, which could simply be that of going out for shopping, it has the advantage of building a strong sense of camaraderie among the students, and of total devotion towards the dance practice and, of course, towards the guru.

During my stay in Bhubaneswar, students were required to reach the dance studio, sometime between 6.30am and 10am, from Monday to Sunday, without any pre-established day dedicated to rest. They were expected to take care of simple tasks, such as sweeping the floor of the dance studio. The practice would not start unless the guru so instructed, by handing a cd or a laptop with the music tracks. The morning sessions were normally dedicated to group practice and were most of the time carried out without the physical presence of the guru in the studio, although he or she was somewhere around the building, ensuring that the class was going on as required.

The dance studio did not have any mirror. Indeed, the entire house did not have mirrors, and students used to practice relying completely on their embodied understanding of the form. The absence of mirrors to work with nurtures a strong somatic awareness and creates a sense of complete surrendering to and trust in, if not dependency on the guru's teaching and corrections.

The morning exercises in Srjan comprised the twenty basic steps of the Odissi technique.<sup>21</sup> These were normally executed without interruption one after the other, at three different speeds, and to recorded music. This activity lasted around thirty minutes and it was followed by a rehearsal of a certain number of choreographies, that the guru indicated day by day and that most of the students in the class would already know. Afterwards, the guru would teach different items to different people. This was done by the guru demonstrating a sequence to someone and giving her some time for individual practice, while teaching another dance sequence to a second student. The students would then show what they had practiced and would receive feedback. This method allows the student to immediately absorb the material taught and receive corrections, thus embodying the correct form, with a minimum number of mistakes or inaccuracies. It is in fact believed that once mistakes are embodied it is hard to remove them from the dancer's body.<sup>22</sup>

The teaching in Srjan normally continued until 1pm or 3pm. Students were then allowed to rest for one or two hours, during which they would prepare their lunch and do some other personal work. They were then called back to the studio around 4pm for the afternoon session, which was more focused on learning new material and polishing the basic technique or some choreographic item. Sometimes students were required to stay in the studio until late at night, alternating supervised learning with individual practice in some corner of the building, which was also the house of the guru. During this individual practice

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<sup>21</sup> See later in this chapter for a description of some of these basic steps.

<sup>22</sup> This discourse is again related to issues of embodied purity and contamination.

they were expected to embody and execute more comfortably what the teacher had demonstrated and corrected during the supervised training. Training could go on until 10pm, unless there was some performance in the local area, in which case students were allowed to leave the dance studio around 6pm in order to go to the auditorium.

## 4. THE STAGE AND THE AUDIENCE

Both in New Delhi and in Bhubaneswar, performances of Indian classical music and dance are often free and open to the general public, whether they are held in indoor air-conditioned theatres or on provisional outdoor stages. Hence, they attract audiences, which may be very diverse in terms of cultural and economic background and more or less familiar with the aesthetics rules that underpin these art forms.

When I started learning Odissi and regularly attending classical dance performances, I thought that my main disadvantage, as a foreign student and member of the audience, was not being able to understand the songs to which Odissi items are choreographed. However, I was repeatedly told by other dancers that the majority of Indian audiences was equally unable to understand what they were watching or listening. Dancers explained that this is because the texts used for Odissi compositions are either in Sanskrit or in medieval Odia both of which not many people are familiar with. Therefore, while many in the audience are generally able to grasp the meanings of the actions portrayed by the performer, through linguistic and visual cues and through their knowledge of Hindu mythology, only a few of them actually would understand the content of the compositions in detail.

Performers often complain that most of their audience is unable to thoroughly understand, sincerely appreciate and legitimately evaluate the subtleties of their artistic skills. In fact,

there is, in India, a clear distinction between the lay and the knowledgeable audience. The knowledgeable audience is defined as *rasika*.<sup>23</sup> The *rasika* is someone who is able to appreciate the art form by being familiar with its aesthetic rules. To know the inner rules of the dance means to be able to decode its messages and subtle meanings, conveyed through facial expressions, hand gestures and choreographic assets. When performing artists, and especially dancers, speak about *rasikas*, they normally mean other dancers and classical performing artists, as well as art aficionados and critics.

During the performances, the *rasikas* are normally expected to sit in the first rows of the stalls area, being considered the only ones able to understand and appreciate the performer's skills and interpretation. Indeed, to attend someone else's performance is for dancers and gurus a way to show respect towards fellow artists and, hence, it is perceived almost as a duty. The way *rasikas* watch and enjoy a performance is arguably very different from the way the lay audience may do so. In fact, as I said, *rasikas* are not only able to understand, but they are also able and entitled to evaluate the performance, by establishing if this has been consistent with the aesthetic requirements of the form.

When going for an Odissi recital, *rasikas* do not normally expect to see something different or original. Especially in Odisha, any evident deviation from the pre-established aesthetic canon unleashes severe critiques among the knowledgeable audiences. While the nature and the details of these critiques may provide the material for further research, it is worth taking into account that, at least until now, from an emic point of view, the purpose of the dancer's, and in fact of any artist's endeavour, is normally considered not challenging aesthetic boundaries, but going deeper within them. Thus, the esteem that a performer or

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<sup>23</sup> The *rasika* is the one who is able to experience *rasa* or aesthetic enjoyment. On the 'rasa theory', see later in this chapter.



a choreographer achieves during his or her artistic career derives more from the capacity of going far in depth rather than in breadth.<sup>24</sup>

Odissi dancers normally present their work either in festivals or in the form of evening-long recitals. Although the traditional Odissi repertoire is mainly choreographed for solo performances, where a single dancer takes the stage, showcasing different items and embodying different characters, nowadays the general audience and, consequently, event organisers show preference for the festival format, which includes performances by different artists. Solo performances are presented only by senior students, established dancers or emerging performers, while junior students normally present their items in group performances. Gurus often form their own dance companies with their most advanced students. Both solo and group performances may be accompanied by live or recorded music.

Group performances have become more and more common and requested by both organisers and the audience. However, many dancers argue that a solo and a group performance provide very different aesthetic experiences to the *rasikas*, as well as to the performer herself. In general, the solo performance is held in higher esteem than the group one. Whereas many choreographers argue that group performances are more enjoyable and accessible to the great majority of the audience,<sup>25</sup> according to several accomplished

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<sup>24</sup> This, as I will show, is coherent with the moral and aesthetic philosophy that informs the embodied experience of Odissi. However, it is hard to deny that Odissi practice is undergoing, nowadays, subtle but constant changes both in form and in content, that in the longer term may also affect discourses on the embodied experience of the dance and the sense of self that practitioners derive from it.

<sup>25</sup> I suggest that this opinion is mainly based on two aspects that characterise the group performance against the solo one. The first is that most of the performers are nowadays not prepared to maintain their presence on stage for a long time, nor is the general audience able or used to pay attention to a solo performer, apart from very few exceptional cases. The second aspect that, I suggest, renders the group performance more enjoyable for a non-specialist audience, is that in this it is easier for the choreographer to portray different characters through different dancers and therefore for the audience to decipher what is being portrayed in greater detail. This is particularly true for narrative choreographies based on mythological stories. Group performances are therefore less cryptic in what they are portraying and easier to understand for non-*rasikas*.

performers I had the opportunity to interview, in group performances the dancer's mastery of the skills, the subtleties of the technique, the devotional mood and the 'sweetness', which should characterise Odissi dance, are in great part lost.

Therefore, Odissi practitioners clearly distinguish between a lay and a knowledgeable audience and argue that group and solo performances provide very different aesthetic experience. In general, what they say suggests that group performances are more appropriate to the enjoyment of the lay audience which is considered not able to decipher the meanings and subtleties of the solo performance, while solo performances are appreciated more by the knowledgeable audience and suitable to advanced practitioners who are able to 'hold' the audience's attention, as dancers often put it. However, I suggest that dance practitioners use the distinction between lay and knowledgeable audiences to claim an elitist status and to give an exclusive value to their embodied knowledge of the dance. I also argue that their claims must be interpreted within the process of classicisation of Indian performing arts, which characterised nationalist and regionalist politics both before and after Independence. I introduce these issues in the following two sections, which aim to provide an ideological and historical background to the emergence of Odissi dance as a classical dance.

## 5. INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE AND ITS IDEOLOGY

The recognition of Odissi as a classical Indian dance needs to be understood in relation to the nationalist and regionalist agendas that characterised the Indian political scenario before and after Independence. As in Europe, in India too, nationalist movements emerged with the purpose of defining the nation's distinctive cultural identity and of gaining political relevance in the international arena.

Indian and European nationalisms had many aspects in common. One of the most relevant is that both Indian and European movements were accompanied by a programmatic process of cultural renaissance, whose purpose was that of identifying the distinctive features of the nation's culture, by reviving a selected part of its past and of its 'traditional' customs and beliefs. In their famous book, *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger (2000) have explained how traditions were invented in Europe in light of nationalist agendas and how these invented traditions were given the attributes of continuity and antiquity. Similarly, India nationalism supported the 'rescue' of cultural knowledge and practices, which were considered inherited from the ancient past and close to disappearance.

Because of the many similarities with European nationalist movements, Indian nationalism, together with the cultural renaissance that characterised it, is often considered an emulation of its western counterpart. Supporting these discourses, dance scholarship has also repeatedly argued that Indian classical dances emerged from an anti-colonial but essentially emulative anxiety of the western-educated Indian intelligentsia towards western civilisation, during both colonial and post-colonial times. (Allen, 1997; Meduri, 2001, 2008a, b; O'Shea, 1998, 2007).

However, other scholars have argued that Indian nationalism and its corresponding cultural renaissance cannot be considered a simple copy of western nationalism. These scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the two movements developed almost in parallel, although within a relation of asymmetric power. Van der Veer (1999) for example has argued that:

A notion of time lapse, in which blueprints of a finished nation-state are exported to less evolved societies via colonialism, may lead to miss the gradual and differential nature of

nation-state formation and to miss that this process involved Britain and India simultaneously, within the same historical period. (18)

Thus, Van der Veer problematises the ideological dependency of India towards the West, and while he does not deny the process of emulation that marked the development of Indian nationalism, he certainly questions its 'unidirectional' character. Similarly Clayton (2007), looking at the mutual influence that characterised British and Indian musical renaissances, already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has warned about the necessity of employing a 'more relational view of music history' (93).

Therefore, although similar to its western counterpart, Indian nationalism had its peculiar and distinctive attributes that affected also the definition of Indian classical dances. Among the similarities, the most evident is perhaps the need to recover a past considered 'genuine' and uncontaminated by 'foreign' elements. Following this romantic rhetoric, revivalists in India strove to prove the truthfulness of their nation's past through 'concrete', material and valuable signs. As in most countries in Europe, in India as well, nationalist movements took 'traditional' performing arts as emblems of the national culture.<sup>26</sup> Music and dance forms became the hallmark of the richness and antiquity of Indian cultural heritage.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, revivalists strove to find any valuable literary, archaeological and architectural source able to prove the stage of development Indian performing arts had reached before foreign invasion, that is until the Middle Ages, when what corresponds nowadays to the Indian state fell under Muslim rule.<sup>27</sup> Chatterjee (1993) has argued that according to Indian nationalist discourses:

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<sup>26</sup> However, while in Europe these performing art traditions were generally named as 'folk', in India, the nationalist movement gave them classical status.

<sup>27</sup> Islam arrived in the North of India in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

In the beginning, the history of the nation was glorious; in wealth, power, learning, and religion, it had reached the pinnacle of civilisation. [...] After this, came the age of decline. The cause of the decline was the Muslim rule, that is to say the subjection of the nation.

(93)

Kapila Vatsyasyan, who has been one of the most prolific and influential figures of colonial and post-colonial scholarship in India and who was educated in the West, conducted extensive research on the ancient sources of Indian dance, but limited her field of investigation to the era before the Middle Ages, when the Muslim invasions began.<sup>28</sup> Vatsyasyan admitted that in compiling her book she had drawn on oral sources and consulted gurus and knowledgeable people who had preserved the dance tradition, bringing it from the past to the present. 'But obviously' - she immediately added - 'a history of the theoretical foundations of Indian dancing cannot rely on such fortuitous circumstances' (xxii). Hence, she found it necessary to identify the signs of the antiquity and richness of Indian dance in archaeological and literary sources, as the oral sources were not considered truly reliable.

Vatsyasyan also supported the elitist character of Indian classical performing arts, writing that:

the aesthetic enjoyment of the classical Indian dance is considerably hampered today by the wide gap between the dancer and the spectator. Even the accomplished dancer, in spite of his mastery of technique, may sometimes only be partially initiated in the essential qualities of the dance form and its aesthetic significance. But, in the case of the audience, only the

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<sup>28</sup> It would be unfair to think that Vatsyasyan did not have a sincere interest in expanding her research further in time and space, as she also stated. However, it is clear that her book *Classical Indian Dance in the Literature and the Arts* (Vatsyayan, 1968) is a response to the preoccupation with identifying the most ancient signs of Indian civilisation, as it was before 'foreign' invasion, in order to establish a common aesthetic pan-Indian and pan-artistic canon. It is difficult to understand, nowadays, to what extent Indian performing arts do 'actually' share or they have been 'made' to share this aesthetic canon, as a consequence of nationalist pan-Indian discourses.

exceptional spectator is acquainted with the language of symbols through which the artist achieves the transformation into the realm of art. (2)

These discourses about the elitist and exclusive character of Indian performing arts are reproduced still nowadays and used to distinguish and even separate, as mentioned above, the *rasika* from the lay audience.

Several scholars (Allen, 1997; Coorlawala, 2004; Meduri, 2001) have pointed out that, in the process of classicisation of Indian dance within the colonial and post-colonial cultural renaissance, a crucial role has been played also by the category of 'respectability'. This idea of respectability has been associated, and in fact considered an acceptance of Christian, and for that matter, Victorian morality into the Indian nationalist movement. In this respect, I suggest that the stress on the idea of purity, as applied to the dance practice nowadays and expressed through the terms of 'pure dance', 'purity of lines', 'purity of interpretation', needs to be interpreted as an aesthetic response to ideas of moral respectability which emerged in the process of classicisation of India dance, within colonial relationships.

Ideas of purity are far from uncommon in Indian interpersonal rhetoric and practices. However, the insistence on aesthetic purity in dance is perhaps an attempt to respond aesthetically to the accusations, promulgated by the British rule and supported by the Indian intelligentsia, regarding the dubious respectability of certain traditional Indian institutions, in particular that of the *devadāsīs*. The *devadāsīs* were temple servants, who used to dance and sing as part of their ritual duties and whose repertoire was apparently rich in erotic references, being based on the *bhakti* literary tradition.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> On the *devadāsīs* of Odisha see the following section in this chapter, while for a discussion of how *bhakti* informs the practice of Odissi, see the last chapter in this dissertation.

O'Shea (2007), among others, has discussed the process of cleansing that the pre-reform Bharatanatyam vocabulary underwent at the hands of the Brahmin woman Rukmini Devi Arundale, one of the most important figures of Indian dance renaissance. In the attempt to recover Indian dance from its disappearance and to make it acceptable to the new Indian upper-middle class, to which she belonged, and to western audiences, whom she was widely familiar with, Rukmini eliminated all the erotic references from the movement and choreographic vocabulary she had learned from traditional dance gurus.<sup>30</sup>

While rescuing the dance from the 'moral degradation' of traditional dancers and dance teachers, Rukmini also strove to secure a spiritual profile for the newborn Bharatanatyam. While rescuing the dance from the temple, she also brought the temple back into the dance, by developing the vocabulary around Hindu religious mythology and iconography. As a visible proof of the spiritual character of the newborn yet timeless dance, Rukmini also introduced the practice of putting the holy icon of Śiva Nāṭaraja on the theatre stage.

The association of dance with Hindu religion and spirituality was not fortuitous but, similarly to the discourse about the antiquity of Indian dance, perfectly fitting within Indian nationalist rhetoric. In this respect, Chatterjee (1993) writes:

The idea that "Indian nationalism" is synonymous with "Hindu nationalism" is not the vestige of some pre-modern religious conception. It is an entirely modern, rationalist and historicist idea. (110)

And, he continues, it is aimed at ideologically cleansing the nation from its non-Hindu, in particular Christian and Muslim, elements. Coorlawala (2004) has discussed how the process of classicisation of Indian dance corresponded to a process of 'sanskritisation', in which Hindu, for that matter Brahmin religious values and ritual habits were incorporated

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<sup>30</sup> As I will discuss, Odissi has maintained a sort of intrinsic double nature, by retaining a strong eroticism, or perhaps simply sensual quality, while being promoted, by its own representatives, as the most spiritual among Indian dance styles.

into the practices and discourses about Indian dance. Chatterjee (1993) and Van der Veer (1999) have discussed how the idea of a Hindu spirituality emerged against the idea of western materialism, within the Indian nationalist discourse. In particular, van der Veer, focusing on the popularisation of the figure of Vivekananda, has argued that the notion of Hindu spirituality promulgated by Vivekananda combined 'Hindu traditions of devotion (bhakti) and evangelical notions of female morality' (34). While femininity becomes the 'signifier of Hindu spirituality', as van der Veer puts it, real women should be the embodiment of self-sacrifice 'in accordance with both Victorian notions of domesticity and Hindu notions of total devotion to their husband' (34).

Chatterjee (1993) has highlighted the relationship between nationalism, spirituality, women and discourses about respectability, arguing that, in its attempt to contrast western power, Indian nationalism forged the ideal of a 'new woman' who was neither westernised nor lay, let alone vulgar or lacking moral sense. Within this nationalist ideology women were attributed the responsibility of representing and preserving the 'true' nature of the nation.<sup>31</sup> And in fact, all these elements, that is to say spirituality, Hinduism, women and respectability are deeply incorporated in the practice of Indian dance, which can arguably be considered the 'masterpiece of Indian nationalism'.<sup>32</sup>

Tapati Guha-Thakurta (cited in Allen, 1997), suggesting that Indian nationalism and its cultural renaissance were heavily influenced by western orientalist discourses, has argued that:

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<sup>31</sup> This is reflected in the fact that, still nowadays, men tend to use western clothes, while many Indian women are often expected and prefer to use 'traditional' clothes such as sari, even in migratory contexts. For a discussion about fashion in British India see Cohn (1996).

<sup>32</sup> As O'Shea (2007) has discussed how these discourses were developed in connection to the revival of Bharatanatyam.



The new nationalist ideology of Indian art, its aesthetic self-definition and its search for a 'tradition' has strong roots in Orientalist writing and debates. British Orientalism produced and structured much of its notion of an Indian art tradition. (213)

While it is difficult to deny the many similarities between cultural revivals in Europe and India and the role Orientalist discourses may have had in defining Indian aesthetics, I argue that to consider Indian art discourses and practices simply a product of western ideology and Orientalist discourses is to greatly limit an understanding of these discourses and practices as mutually defining. I also suggest that this intellectual attitude reproduces a simplistic ideological subordination of the East towards the West, and hence it needs to be revised, in order not to reduce on the one hand the interest of western practitioners towards Indian arts to an exotic and orientalist fascination, and on the other hand Indian cultural practices and discourses to an anxiety of inferiority towards the West.

Therefore, I propose a re-consideration of Indian performing arts, from a perspective that takes into account the mutual influences in the definition of aesthetics and that does not demonise reciprocal fascinations, but tries to understand to what kind of needs, whether symbolic, moral, spiritual, political, economical, or perhaps all of them at once, these fascinations respond. In particular, I suggest that it is important to start from the individuals and to investigate how the subjects take on particular practices and give meaning to them within a personal, as well as historical and cultural trajectory. This research responds in part to this quest.

## 6. LOOKING FOR EVIDENCE

Odissi achieved classical status in the late 1950s, as a response to the regionalist movements that characterised Indian political scenario immediately after Independence.

The classicisation of Odissi was made possible by the programmatic work that the Jayantika group carried out in Cuttack<sup>33</sup> during the 1950s (Pathy, 2007; Roy, 2009). The Jayantika group had been established with the explicit purpose of ‘creating’ a classical dance tradition that would be distinctive of Odisha. The group included a few scholars and local dance teachers who, unlike Rukmini Devi, did not belong to Brahmin families, but had been raised within local martial and performing arts environments.

Odissi revivalists were aware that for Odissi dance to claim classical status certain conditions had to be met. In particular, following the path established by the revival of Bharatanatyam, Odissi revivalists were concerned with identifying valuable literary, archaeological and architectural sources able to prove the antiquity of the dance form. In this respect, they realised that the Nāṭyaśāstra mentioned the existence of a local dance called Odra Magadhi<sup>34</sup> and deducted that this dance was the precursor of Odissi. They also used other treatises, such as the Abhinaya Darpana, written around the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., and the Abhinaya Chandrika, written around the 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D., to elaborate the movement vocabulary of the new dance form.

It was equally easy for the revivalists to find archaeological and architectural evidence in support of the antiquity of Odissi dance. In fact, they realised that in the Udaygiri caves, an archaeological site near the city of Bhubaneswar, there was an inscription on stone attributed to the Jain King Kharavela, who ruled over what is nowadays the land of Odisha in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. In this inscription the king described himself as an expert in ‘celestial arts’ (Khokar and Khokar, 2011). Odissi revivalists took this inscription as the proof that dance and performing arts had flourished in Odisha since at least 2000 years ago.

Another architectural source that legitimized Odissi’s quest for classical status was found in local Hindu pre-medieval temples, in particular the Mukteswara temple (10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)

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<sup>33</sup> Cuttack is, together with Bhubaneswar, an important urban centre in Odisha.

<sup>34</sup> Odra is considered the ancient name of what is nowadays the state of Odisha.

in Bhubaneswar and the Konark temple (13<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) in Puri, both of them rich in friezes and sculptures depicting sensuous female figures in dancing-like poses or playing musical instruments. This sculptural imagery was integrated into the Odissi vocabulary and greatly contributed to the stylistic form of the dance.

Alongside the literary and archaeological sources, revivalist narratives 'constructed' Odissi as an heir of local performing art traditions, in particular those of the *māhāris* and of the *gotipua*, while they excluded an explicit connection to other forms of local martial arts and folk theatre (Pathy, 2007). The *māhāris* were Odia temple servants, similar to the South India devadāsīs (O'Shea 2007). Traditionally dedicated to the temple, they used to perform, as part of their daily service, worship rituals through dancing and singing, although the actual nature of their dancing and singing is generally unclear.<sup>35</sup>

The official story goes that, as in the case of the South Indian devadāsīs, the *māhāris* of Orissa had enjoyed a period of social esteem and prestige, followed by a chronic decadence, due to their association with concubinage and promiscuous behaviour. According to this official historiography, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the coming of the Muslim rule over the territories nowadays corresponding to the state of Odisha, these women were gradually deprived of the economic support they used to receive for their temple service and were employed in royal courts. In this context, the official story continues, their social status began to degenerate as they started to gain their income mainly from providing sexual services. As a consequence of their marginalisation, the tradition of the *gotipua* emerged (Kothari, 1968). The *gotipuas* were young boys who used to train under a guru in a

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<sup>35</sup> For a detailed ethnographic study of the *māhāris* tradition of Orissa see Apffel-Marglin (1985). For a study of the body of the *māhāris* see Banerji (2012). See also Jordan (2003).

form of acrobatic dance and folk theatre and used to entertain audiences on several social occasions. Gotipuas dressed as women and apparently as māsāris.<sup>36</sup>

Under the British rule, the māsāris were completely marginalised and labelled as prostitutes, attracting the disdain not only of the foreign administration, but also of the local intelligentsia and consequently of the broader society. Arguing that the decadence of the māsāris, initially under the Muslim rule and then under the Christian British rule, the revivalists were clearly responding to the nationalist and regionalist quest for an uncontaminated indigenous past, which was prior to degenerating external influences.

According to Apfell-Marglin (1985), when the Odissi revivalist movement took shape in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the institution of the māsāris had almost disappeared. Only a few of these women had survived, whereas the tradition of the gotipua was still flourishing. In fact, most of the Odissi revivalists had trained as gotipua, except for Pankajcharan Das, who had been groomed in a māsāris household.

Guru Pankajcharan is normally referred to as the guru of the gurus, because he was the oldest among the makers of Odissi dance. However, he was soon overshadowed by the charismatic figure of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Mohapatra was not only a prolific choreographer, but also a beloved teacher who travelled all over the world for the cause of Odissi. The other two gurus recognised nowadays as the makers of Odissi dance were Deba Prasad Das and Mayadhar Raut. At the time of the Jayantika group, these gurus defined a basic common vocabulary for Odissi dance. However, when the Jayantika group dissolved, because of disputes emerging among the gurus, each of these gurus developed his own 'style' of Odissi, characterised by specificities in the movement and choreographic vocabulary.

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<sup>36</sup> This cross-dressing tradition can be explained also in relation to the development of the spiritual movement known as bhakti. The bhakti movement identifies all devotees as female beings in love with a male God. See also Layer I.

The work of guru Surendranath Jena must be also mentioned here, even if he is usually not recognised as one of the makers of Odissi dance (Lopez y Royo, 2010). Guru Surendranath Jena developed his own style through a keen study of temple sculptures. However, his choreographic language and his pantomime did not adhere to the mainstream aesthetic ideals of Odissi in particular, and of Indian classical dance in general. In fact, he employed body stances and facial expressions, which are not considered graceful, as dominant discourses about aesthetics expect Odissi to be.

In her biography of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Citaristi (2005) provides the history of how Odissi developed as a classical form. She focuses on the work of her guru, retracing his life in the performing arts, initially as a gotipua dancer, then as a young actor in folk theatre groups and finally as one of the most prolific makers of classical dance. An important role in the systematisation of Odissi was also played by the doyen Sanjukta Panigrahi, as she travelled and trained for a certain period at Kalakshetra, the institution founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in order to revive the South Indian temple dance Bharatanatyam. From there, Sanjukta brought the hand gestures, known as *hasta mudrās*, and other codified movements that were readily inserted and developed by Kelucharan Mohapatra in the vocabulary of Odissi (Citaristi, 2005).

Roy (2009) has argued that the makers of Odissi, that is to say the gurus who formed the Jayantika group, while referring to the devotional dance of the *māhāris*, never actually involved these women in the revivalist process. In fact, they systematically marginalised them. According to Roy, the reference to the *māhāris*' dance provided the newborn Odissi with a spiritual and religious reference, that the gotipua dance did not necessarily have, being more entertaining, and hence more mundane in scope. Therefore, the figure of the *māhāris* legitimated the dance by providing it with a devotional and spiritual character.

The spiritual character of Odissi dance is normally explained through the devotion to Lord Jagannātha, considered a form of Lord Kṛṣṇa and, hence, of Viṣṇu, one of the main deities of the Hindu pantheon. Eschmann (1978) has argued that the cult of Jagannātha was of tribal origin and was later on incorporated into the dominant Hindu discourse, within Vaiṣṇavism.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the representation of Lord Jagannātha considerably departs from the predominant visual aesthetics of Hinduism. Jagannātha's *mūrti*<sup>38</sup> is normally made of wood and is rather rough in appearance, and appears unfinished, as the legend suggests it should be.<sup>39</sup>



FIG. 6: JAGANNĀTHA'S MŪRTI

<sup>37</sup> One of the most important branches of Hindu religion, which focuses on the worshipping of lord Viṣṇu and of its forms, including Kṛṣṇa, Rāma and Lord Jagannātha.

<sup>38</sup> The *mūrti* is the material representation of a deity. Unlike the Christian and Catholic representations, however, the Hindu *mūrti* is the god, and it renders visible the real presence of the god.

<sup>39</sup> Eschmann (1978) writes: 'when the sacred log (*daru*) appeared in Puri, nobody could carve it. Finally Jagannātha (in another version Visvakarma) appeared as a feeble old carpenter, who was at first derided by the king. The divine carpenter undertook the task to carve the figures, on the condition of not being disturbed. The queen Gundica could not restrain herself, she peeped in, and so the figures remained unfinished' (99).

While Jagannātha is worshiped all over India as an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa and consequently of Viṣṇu, the great majority of his devotees are found in Odisha.<sup>40</sup> Most of the songs used in Odissi dance are dedicated to Kṛṣṇa, too. Finally, it is not uncommon that, during an Odissi recital, a representation of Lord Jagannātha is placed in the right corner of the stage, as if to remind the audience of the spiritual character of the dance they are watching.

Commenting on the different aspects of Odissi revival, Roy (2009) has argued that:

The reconstructive process in Orissa first, takes no account of the philosophical basis of the original temple dances; second, employs movements best suited to a secular, international audience while maintaining the façade of religious philosophy; and third, incorporates colonial values of Christian morality, classicism, and so-called ‘civilisation’ achieved often through silencing of the female voice and/or the subaltern viewpoint. (9)

Therefore, according to Roy, the reference to the māsāris’ dance, to literary sources and to religious elements disguises the secular character of Odissi. It also disguises an act of power and exclusion whose victims were mainly subaltern women.

I agree with Roy, especially in relation to the role that the māsāris may or may not have played in the revival of Odissi dance. However, I suggest that, by belittling the religious element in the dance practice, one deprives of meaning the dancers’ experience of spirituality and the sense of empowerment they derive from it, at the same time failing to take into account the performative nature that characterises most spiritual behaviour in India. I agree with Lopez y Royo (2007) when she suggests Roy’s complaint hides a nostalgic feeling of loss of an institution that perhaps was simply obsolete.

The fact that Odissi has a movement vocabulary suited for an international audience should not surprise either, because Odissi was ‘created’ to be performed in theatres, and

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<sup>40</sup> On the relationship between the cult of Lord Jagannātha and the emergence of Odia nationalism see Dash (1978).

immediately reached the global stage. As for the 'secular' audience, I am even more sceptical, as the distinction between secular and religious is far less meaningful to Indian audiences and performers than to western ones.

Certainly, while with the creation of a national Indian Hindu identity, after Independence, the link between performing arts and religious discourses has become stronger and more compelling (Allen, 1997; Coorlawala, 2004; Srinivasan, 1985), it is hard to deny that the relationship between the performative and the spiritual is not new in India, and that the issue at stake is what religiosity or spirituality mean to Odissi practitioners nowadays. I will discuss the issue of spirituality in the last chapter of this work, while in the following chapter, Layer IV, I hope to show that the way women are portrayed in this dance, as well as the way women experience their involvement in the practice is far from being a simplistic exercise of male power over women's sense of self.

In short, the revivalist process in Odisha, as in other regions of India, has been characterised by the identification of sculptural, architectural, archaeological and literary proofs of the antiquity of the dance form, concomitant to the rescue of local forms of performing arts, and the systematisation of the dance vocabulary, following the example of Bharatanatyam. In particular, in Odissi, the tradition of the *māhāris* and the *gotipua*, together with the sculptures that decorate local Hindu temples, local ancient treatises on the performing arts, and finally the reference to the symbol and the cult of Jagannātha, and consequently of Kṛṣṇa, provided the revivalists with strong local references for identifying Odissi as a regional dance, while positioning it on the national and international arena, through the quest for classical status.



## 7. TRANSMITTING THE DANCE

Odissi training is based on the idea that the dance form has to remain unchanged when passing from teacher to student. In fact, both teacher and student are generally considered channels or custodians, rather than originators or creators of the dance movement vocabulary. However, this principle does not deny authority to the choreographic process. Indeed, dance choreographies are always explicitly and clearly identified as the creation of particular individuals. And it is also for this reason that they must be preserved and transmitted as they have been created and learned. The transmission process is hence dominated by the idea that one has to reproduce what has been taught by the teacher, ideally with no alterations.

It is clear that, passing from one body to another body, dance undergoes continuous transformations. Practitioners often admit that different dancers have different energies and attitudes, apart from different bodies, and this emerges in their embodiment of the form. Against this awareness, Odissi practitioners are often obsessed with maintaining the 'purity' of the dance form, especially by eschewing fusions with other styles and movement vocabularies and by restricting any subjective interpretation.

Kelucharan Mohapatra was well aware of the diversity of bodies and the variety of individual energies and in fact he used to choreograph items for particular dancers and then to adjust these same items when teaching them to others students (Kumkum Lal, interview). Similarly, he used to execute the same choreographies with either slight or important variations every time he was performing (Ratikant Mohapatra, personal communication). However, in the last decades, Odissi dance has undergone a process of apparent crystallisation. Choreographies are fixed and taught as they have been learned, giving the impression that Odissi is an unchanging form.

This process of crystallisation apparently started under guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, when he began to have access to filming devices and when he started travelling and teaching to different people all over India and abroad, in short and intensive workshops. In order to prevent the fading of the form and the blurring of its aesthetic principles, the movement vocabulary itself had to become more and more systematised and the teaching process more precise in terms of details, in order to establish a globally shared, locally informed canon. Filming devices, which Kelucharan was very fond of (Kumkum Lal, interview), supported this process of crystallisation.

Still nowadays, especially in Odisha, the issue of the aesthetic boundaries of the form is object of debate. Anything that seems to challenge the pre-established boundaries of the form is described through the expression ‘fusion derived by confusion’ (Ratikant Mohapatra, personal communication).<sup>41</sup> Although Odissi revivalists and practitioners, especially in Odisha, like to present Odissi as an unchanged dance form, it is clear that, in the approximately 60 years of its life, this dance style has undergone important transformations, even within the style of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. In fact, while learning from the same guru, different generations of his students have embodied slightly different movement vocabularies. According to his disciples, Kelucharan was a visionary artist and an untiring choreographer, with a tendency towards precision and detail. It is arguable therefore that he kept perfecting the form until the very end of his life.

By looking at different generations of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra’s students, one is able to identify important differences in the movement vocabulary itself. As I have already mentioned, these differences are hard to perceive, unless one is well trained to do so, and often even harder to articulate. However, for dancers they are important, as these nuances may be based on important differences in the way the movement is executed.

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<sup>41</sup> Clearly these words reiterate discourses about ‘purity’. Purity becomes a moral attribute for an aesthetic form, defining it as respectable and dignified.

Exemplary in this sense is the basic movement of the torso. For example, according to what has been demonstrated to me by one of her students, Madhavi Mudgal, a senior disciple of Kelucharan, teaches the movement of the torso as a contraction and release of the lateral costal muscles. In Srjan, the school where I trained and carried out part of my research, the movements of the torso are derived from an extension of the muscles on the horizontal line. These differences, apparently only formal, affect the way the skeleton and the muscles are coordinated and thus dancers' embodied experience.

The formal variations are more evident among the different styles of Odissi. In fact, the official discourse suggests that Odissi has four styles (Pathy, 2007; Roy, 2009), derived from the four gurus who joined the Jayantika group. As noted above, these gurus are Pankajcharan Das, Debaprasad Das, Mayadhar Raut and Kelucharan Mohapatra. When the four gurus came together to systematise Odissi in order to claim its classical status, they fixed its basic vocabulary, identifying the distinctive stances of the style, defining the repertoire, the costume and the ornaments the dancer was supposed to wear.

The canon they established is still largely followed nowadays although, as noted above, changes and transformations are taking place at a steady pace. Some choreographers are using non-Odia music, some dancers are slightly changing the costume and jewellery, the movement and choreographic vocabulary is being expanded in different directions. Here, however, I take into account the vocabulary that I have learned as part of my training in New Delhi and Odisha. It is reasonable to think that the version of Odissi that I have embodied corresponds to the late Kelucharan style, which departs somewhat from the style he taught to previous generations of students. It is also arguable that both Nrityagram and Srjan continue to slightly modify the form in order to make it closer to their aesthetic ideal of the dance, even if they argue that they are the preservers of the 'pure' Kelucharan style.

## 8. THE BASIC DANCE TECHNIQUE

The training in Odissi begins with the learning of the cauka and tribhaṅga steps. Cauka and tribhaṅga are the two basic stances distinctive of this dance vocabulary. The cauka is a square-like stance in which the legs are turned out, the knees are significantly bent, and the feet are kept on the same line pointing outwards. The torso is straight and the arms are opened at shoulder level. In its static presentation, cauka is a symmetrical position, although the movements derived from this stance are developed by displacing the torso from the vertical axis, hence creating a sense of asymmetry in the body.



FIG. 7: CAUKA STANCE (BY IOANNIS LIGNOS)

In the tribhaṅga position, the feet are kept open but one in front of the other, the knees are bent, the torso is exaggeratedly deflected towards the side of the front leg, the weight is kept on back leg, the head is slightly tilted and the arms are kept one on the hip and the other on the thigh. In this position the body forms a sort of s-shape with three bends at the

neck, waist and knee level. In fact, the word tribhaṅga means ‘three bends’. In the Kelucharan style that I have learned this tribhaṅga stance is achieved by pushing the torso towards one side and by stretching the abdominal and lateral muscles of the torso on the horizontal level. Teachers are very clear that it is the torso and not the hips that has to be displaced from the vertical axis.



**FIG. 8: TRIBHAṅGA STANCE (BY IOANNIS LIGNOS)**

The Kelucharan style is characterised by firm control of the hips, subtle movements of the torso and delicate small movements around the basic body stances. These ornamentations constitute a rich, yet uncoded vocabulary of movements, which are often described as ‘nuances’ or ‘movement details’. While the main body movements can be, so to speak, verbally ‘described’ in quite a satisfactory way, and are often ‘explained’ in terms of

geometrical shapes,<sup>42</sup> these nuances can be grasped only by the trained eye and can be executed only by the well-trained body. These ornamentations can be generally described as rounded movements at the level of the joints.

Apart from the *cauka* and *tribhaṅga*, Odissi includes also other stances, in particular the *samabhaṅga*, in which the body is kept straight, standing in a neutral position, and the *abhaṅga*, which is a position achieved by deflecting the torso to the side from the *samabhaṅga* stance and therefore keeping the body weight only on one leg, while slightly bending the other.



FIG. 9: SAMABHAṅGA STANCE (BY IOANNIS LIGNOS)

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<sup>42</sup> See Layer III.





**FIG. 10: ABHAṅGA STANCE (BY IOANNIS LIGNOS)**

Odissi dance vocabulary is mainly an elaboration of these four basic stances. Compared to cauka and tribhaṅga, samabhaṅga and abhaṅga do not require specific training, as they are close to the neutral positions of the human body. On the contrary, the execution of the cauka and the tribhaṅga movements requires the dancer to construct a distinctive, dance-specific way of moving. For this reason Kelucharan devised twenty basic steps, ten in cauka and ten in tribhaṅga, as the basic technique of Odissi. In the early stages of his teaching career, he used to teach more complex sequences (Kumkum Lal, interview). The systematisation of the cauka and tribhaṅga are arguably a solution that he found convenient when teaching during short intensive courses. The purpose of the cauka and

tribhaṅga basic steps is often described by practitioners as that of 'making' or 'shaping' the body of the dancer. Through these exercises the dancer learns how to move her body according to the aesthetic principles of the form, in particular she learns to distinguish and coordinate the movements of the lower and the upper body.

As I will discuss later, dancers often describe Odissi as a very unnatural, even awkward movement vocabulary, especially because of the way the body is used in the cauka and tribhaṅga positions. What makes these two stances difficult to execute is not only the fact that the knees must be kept bent all the time, and the legs are completely turned out, but also the fact that lower and upper body are engaged in executing quite different movements at the same time or one just after the other. The only exception is 'cauka 1'. In this basic movement, the body is used as a unit. Keeping the knees bent, the dancer jumps on both feet so that, while lifting her body, she is in fact grounding it. 'Cauka 2' is more complex. In this stance, while standing in cauka position, the dancer stamps the right foot against the floor. Thereafter, she slowly shifts the torso to the left, while at the same time shifting the head, the eyes and the right arm to the right. Here, the body is kept in the same spot and virtually in the same position. Therefore, the action is mostly internal to the body, rather than involving a displacement in space. In executing this movement, the upper body of the dancer embodies an elastic quality, being extended from the centre out, almost creating space within the body of the dancer and, in particular, between the limbs and the torso. It is important to notice that the movements of the upper body are conceived and executed as a consequence of the movements of the legs. A similar procedure is used in 'tribhaṅga 1'. Here, after stamping the right foot, the dancer shifts the torso to the left, while also shifting head and eyes to the right. The movement ends with the torso and head coming back to the initial position.



In the execution of the cauka and tribhaṅga steps, and therefore in the entire Odissi vocabulary, there is a clear separation between lower and upper body. The lower body, and in particular the legs and feet are involved in discrete movements, whose purpose is that of creating rhythmic patterns and of displacing the body in space. The rhythmic patterns are produced by stamping the feet against the floor, with flat foot, or by tapping the toes or the heel, or by brushing the heel against the floor. The upper body is mostly engaged in continuous and circular movements, at the level of the joints. The quality of the movements of the upper body is quite different from the quality of the movements of legs and feet. In the following chapter, Layer IV, I will explain this point in more detail, elaborating on the cultural meanings attributed to these characteristics of the movement vocabulary.

The cauka and tribhaṅga steps are classified according to the rhythmic patterns produced by the stamping of the feet. During the performance, the dancer wears ankle bells, which enhance the sound of this rhythmic footwork. The basic steps are executed in a four-beat metre, called *ektāla*. The steps are a rhythmic elaboration of this basic metre and they are classified and ordered according to the number of beats, which are marked out by the footwork. In 'cauka 1', for example, the dancer stamps only on the first beat, in 'cauka 2', she stamps on the first and third, in 'cauka 3', on the first, second and third and so on. The chart below provides the rhythmic organisation of the ten basic cauka and tribhaṅga steps.

Basic 4 beats and their subdivision from 1 to 10 beats, as in *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* steps

	1				2				3				4				
1	O																
2	O								O								
3	O				O				O								
4	O				O				O				O				
5	O				O				O		O		O				
6	O		O		O				O		O		O				
7	O		O		O		O		O		O		O				
8	O		O		O		O		O		O		O		O		
9	O		O		O		O		O		O		O	O	O		
10	O		O	O	O		O		O		O		O	O	O		

FIG. 11: BASIC EKTĀLA RHYTHMIC PATTERNS

Although *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* steps are practiced to a four beat metre, their rhythmic articulation can be applied to any metric pattern, so that they constitute the basic vocabulary of the dance footwork. Odissi movement vocabulary is an elaboration of these rhythmic and kinetic units.

The basic steps of *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* are executed in at least three speeds: *vilambita*, or slow, *madhya*, or medium, and *druta*, or fast speed. Sometimes the steps may be executed in *ati druta*, or 'very fast' speed. Each of these speeds is double the previous one, however they are largely relative, in that one can decide how slow a slow speed can be. Although dancers create rhythmic patterns with their footwork and therefore they are musicians in

the strict sense, they are expected to adjust to the speed and the rhythmic patterns played by the musician, in particular by the drum player.

In Srjan, most of the training is carried out with recorded music, while in New Delhi, as noted above, my dance classes were always accompanied live by a drum player. These two different cases have provided interesting insights into the relationship between music and dance and, consequently, between musicians and dancers. In fact, examining these two cases one realises that, when practicing to recorded music, the dancer is obviously required to adjust to the given speed, without even taking into account the possibility of 'controlling' the speed of her execution by 'controlling', so to speak, the drum player's execution, while when practicing with live music, musicians often take control over the body of the dancer, for instance by accelerating the speed or prolonging the exercise, beyond what is normally expected or established. I will discuss this point in the last section of Layer II.

The practice of *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* is sometimes complemented by short phrases, called *arasa*. In the past, most of the training in Odissi consisted in learning *arasa*, or movement phrases. However, as Kelucharan started teaching in short courses and as his students started learning with the purpose of performing as soon as possible, all the technical training was limited to the *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* steps and it was immediately followed by the learning of choreographic items (Kumkum Lal, interview). Still nowadays, his son Ratikant and his daughter-in-law Sujata Mohapatra teach only the basic steps and then the choreographies. In contrast, during my stay in Delhi I had the chance to learn more elements of the technique outside of the choreographic items, to which this technique is applied, such as codified walks, jumps, spins and movements of the head, neck, torso, eyes etc. Priyambada Pattnaik also invited us, from time to time, to invent steps or short choreographic sequences.

While creating new dance material is far from giving a sense of authorship to the student, it clearly establishes a very different relationship between the practitioner, the technique and the guru. It nurtures in the student's mind the idea that dance is not bound to what has been learned and that new things can be created even if within the aesthetic limitations of the form. In Srjan, on the contrary, students are never expected, let alone encouraged to think that they can choreograph or make choreographic decisions. Dancers are trained to think that they are performers and their responsibility is to accurately execute the movements as taught by the guru. Because the movement and choreographic vocabulary inherited by the guru is considered the maximum expression of beauty, perfection and purity, there is no need to modify, add, subtract, or invent anything else. The only responsibility of the dancer is that of interpreting, to the best of her ability, what is considered perfect in its ideal form.

## 9. CHOREOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS

Like other classical Indian dances, Odissi too comprises both *abhinaya*, or pantomimic dance, and *nṛtta*, or pure dance. While the former depicts particular characters, emotions and psychophysical states, and therefore conveys stories through the use of hand gestures, bodily movements and facial expressions, the latter is apparently contentless and contextless.

Abhinaya choreographies are normally said to use pantomime to narrate stories. However, they are far from representing linear narrations. The choreographies, which are nevertheless based on similarly constructed poems, reconstruct psychophysical states, by investigating the events that have induced them and that have been induced by them. For example a certain character may be disappointed. The choreography portrays the reasons

that have caused this disappointment, which can also be multi-layered, and the effects of this disappointment on the character itself as well as on the surrounding environment.

Items of pure dance are called *pallavi* in Odissi. What characterises *nṛtta* and hence a *pallavi* is the ‘pure’ or ‘abstract’<sup>43</sup> elaboration of bodily movements and the use of hand gestures as ornamentation rather than as signs of specific meanings or emotions. The elaboration of bodily movements in *nṛtta* proceeds together with the elaboration of music.

Odissi music, like Hindustani and Carnatic classical music, is derived by the combination of two main components: *tāla* and *rāga*. Normally dancers translate the terms *tāla* and *rāga* respectively with ‘rhythm’ and ‘melody’, although neither term is an exact translation of the Indian concepts.

Dancers, and especially Odissi dancers, who more often than not do not receive a specific musical training or education, generally lack a technical understanding of the music and of the specific vocabulary used by the musicians. Therefore, the way I speak about music and I use musical terms in this dissertation broadly reflects the basic knowledge that most Odissi practitioners have about the music used to accompany the dance.

It is worth stressing that dancers have an embodied, rather than analytical or conceptual understanding of music. They learn music through movement and they are used to ‘feel’, rather than ‘listen’ to it. For them, music is the sound that corresponds to a unit of movement. In fact, every single movement in dance is conceived and experienced as a sonic-kinetic unit, whether the sound is clearly audible through the execution of the rhythmic footwork or is silently felt through the movements of the torso and upper limbs.

Dancers associated *tāla* to their footwork and to the rhythmic patterns created by the drum player, and *rāga* to the movements of the upper body and to the music of the vocalist,

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<sup>43</sup> I put the terms ‘pure’, ‘abstract’, ‘true’ in inverted commas to emphasise their political and controversial nature.

violinist or flautist, which normally accompany a traditional Odissi performance. The basic elements of the rhythm, or beats, are normally 'enunciated' through *bols* or *bānīs*, which are onomatopoeic syllables that reproduce the sound of the beats played by the drum. Dancers identify the basic elements of the *rāga* with the *svaras*. The *svaras* are normally translated by dancers as notes, although a *svara* is a more complex unit than a note as intended in western music.

A *pallavi* item is considered an elaboration of pure movement, that is to say movement without a specific meaning or content. This elaboration of movement goes hand in hand with the elaboration of *tāla* and *rāga*, or of the rhythmic and melodic patterns. Therefore, as the item develops, movements and music become generally faster and more complex both rhythmically and melodically. In a *pallavi*, emphasis is given to the rhythmic footwork and to the abstract and geometrical shapes made by the limbs in space, whereas in *abhinaya* emphasis is put on the dramatic interpretation of the different characters.

Pantomimic items are always based on and meant to interpret a song, which is in turn based on lyrics taken from Odia or Sanskrit poems, mainly from the medieval *bhakti* tradition or from ancient Sanskrit texts. In the latter case, the texts are called *ślokas* and are normally dedicated to a Hindu deity, although they can also depict other concepts such as the seasons. The verses dedicated to Hindu deities normally are prayers in which the poet, and consequently the dancer, praises the gods or goddesses with the purpose of asking them blessing or support. The dancer becomes in turn the devotee, the deity or some character of the deity's entourage. Therefore, although *ślokas* do not belong to the *bhakti* tradition in a strict sense, they still do have a devotional character. *Abhinayas* based on *bhakti* poems normally depict the life of Lord Kṛṣṇa, from his childhood to his adulthood, from his mischievous deeds as a young lover, to the defeat he inflicted on several demons which are deemed to have threatened the survival of the world.

Apart from pallavi and abhinaya items, most Odissi choreographies are a combination of pure and pantomimic dance. Normally it is easy to distinguish the nṛtta and abhinaya sections in the choreographies, because while the abhinaya is accompanied by lyrics, the nṛtta sections are accompanied by onomatopoeic syllables, bānīs or bols, which as noted above reproduce the different sounds made by the drum player on the pakhāvaj.

During the learning process, dancers often accompany their movement execution by vocalising these syllables or singing the lyrics or the rāga. They use the bānī in sections in which the footwork is prominent, while they sing the lyrics or svaras where the emphasis is on pantomime or on the upper body movements. When they rehearse a full choreography, dancers may alternate bols with lyrics, or with the svaras, depending on whether they are giving more attention to the rhythmic footwork or to the movements of the torso and upper limbs.

In the case of live music accompaniment, the drum player will vocalise the bols and raise his voice especially in sections where the rhythmic footwork is more prominent, while he will lower his voice where the lyrics or the rāga are more significant in the choreography, leaving more space for the singer. This dynamic among musicians is meant to help dancers focus on what is more important in the specific section of the choreography, and so to execute it correctly. In most pallavis, the voice of the drum player proceeds along with that of the singer, while in most abhinaya, the drum player does not sing the bols at all. There are also short sections, in which the singer will sit back. But both singer, the embodiment of rāga, and drummer, the embodiment of tāla, are considered essential to Odissi, as they are associated respectively with its circular, gentle and continuous movements of the upper body and with the rhythmic footwork.

In Odissi, nṛtta is often simply called ‘technique’. However, gurus are clear that technique is also employed in abhinaya, and in fact one does not start to learn abhinaya unless she

has embodied the form, through the technical training. In fact, in abhinaya choreographies the technique is subtly employed and therefore is almost concealed. The traditional choreographies that consist of both nṛtta and abhinaya are the introductory item of the Odissi repertoire, *Mangalacharan*, dedicated to a particular Hindu god or goddess, and *Moksa*, the closing item of the repertoire, which again contains both a section of pure dance and verses in Sanskrit interpreted through gestures, facial expressions and pantomimic bodily movements. In addition, guru Kelucharan Mohapatra choreographed many dance dramas depicting the mythological stories of Hindu gods and goddesses. Finally, the traditional repertoire as established by the Jayantika group also comprises *Batu Nritya*, a pure dance piece that stands on its own and whose purpose is to represent poses and stances taken from or inspired by the sculptures and friezes of local Hindu temples, in particular of the Sun temple in Konark and the Mukteswara temple in Bhubaneswar.

Despite being considered contentless and contextless, I suggest that pallavis depict a particular character and a particular emotion, although they do not elaborate it through particular meanings and contexts. In fact, many 'pure' movements in Odissi nṛtta are more representational than abstract. Many of these movements portray girls looking at a mirror, or adorning themselves, wearing jewellery or holding a veil. Other movements are inspired by natural elements, for example waves. In general, pallavis are said to be inspired by temple sculptures, which are normally feminine human figures in dancing-like poses, or represented as playing musical instruments.<sup>44</sup>

Like all Indian music and dance performances, the performance of Odissi is expected to accomplish the ultimate aesthetic experience known as *rasa*. The aesthetic theory of *rasa* was first mentioned by Bharata Muni in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and further developed in later treatises. According to the *rasa* aesthetic theory, which, as Vatsyasyan (1968) suggests, is

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<sup>44</sup> I will look at and examine this presumably 'neutral' character represented in pure dance in the following chapter, Layer IV.



what ‘provides an underlying unity to the Indian arts’ (6), the ultimate purpose of art, and therefore the ultimate aim of the artist is to experience and especially to allow the audience to experience rasa. Rasa is a term normally translated in everyday usage as ‘flavour’ or ‘juice’. In the Nāṭyaśāstra, the author argues that rasa is a feeling or sentiment that is produced as an effect of *bhāva*, or mental states and emotions. Bharata Muni suggested that there are eight main bhāvas (*sthāyī bhāvas*), which are latent in all human beings. The eight bhāvas are love, mirth, sorrow, anger, energy, terror, disgust, astonishment, and the corresponding rasas are erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious and marvellous.<sup>45</sup>

While these emotions are ‘real’, as they can be found in daily life, their representation in the performing arts is not realistic, although it has to have some resemblance to reality. In this respect, Bharata Muni introduced the distinction between *lokadharmī* or realistic representation, and *natyādharmī* or stylised representation. Therefore, there is a difference between real and aesthetic emotions. While they are substantially the same, as they are latently present in all human beings, the way they are expressed in life is different from the way they are portrayed in dance. However, it is exactly because they are already ‘there’, latent in all human beings, that one can ‘become a character’ or experience an emotion that she has never experienced in real life.

As mentioned above, the rasa theory was elaborated by later scholars, among whom Abhinavagupta (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> A.D.) and Rūpa Gosvāmin (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> A.D.) are particularly important (Haberman, 2001). While for Abhinavagupta rasa is the enjoyment that the audience derives from the artist’s performance, for Gosvāmin, rasa is the enjoyment that first and foremost the performer experiences, and only subsequently the audience can

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<sup>45</sup> Two other bhāvas and rasas were added by later treatises: śānti, or peace, and vātsalya, or paternal love.

share with the dancer.<sup>46</sup> This enjoyment is associated with an extraordinary experience rather than with a particular emotion (Schechner, 2001). This means that regardless of the emotion portrayed in abhinaya, if the performer is able to 'become' the character, and the vocabulary used to portray that character is stylised, the audience, and perhaps also the performer, can experience a pleasure which is detached from the particular emotions depicted in the dance, as well as from one's own psychophysical states. This aesthetic pleasure, or *rasa*, is deemed to lead to and sometimes to coincide with the experience of *ānanda*, or bliss, achieving therefore a spiritual transcendental value.

Throughout this dissertation, I look at how these aesthetic principles shape dancers' embodied experience, focusing in particular on the practices of dance transmission and on the discourses that concern the practitioners' cultural identity, body, mind and sense of self.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an ethnographic, historical and choreographic account of the dance practice examined in this dissertation. I have especially highlighted the similarities and differences between the two ethnographic contexts in which I carried out my fieldwork. In particular, I have drawn attention to how subtle variations in the movement vocabulary, as taught by different teachers, affect dancers' embodied experience and how these variations, often perceived in terms of nuances, allow a form of 'control' of the guru over the student's body, making it difficult, if not impossible for the student to train under more than a teacher at the same time and sometimes even to change teacher.

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<sup>46</sup> See also Layer I.

I have also suggested that the training context affects the practice and experience of dance. In particular, I have highlighted that depending on the actual conditions of the training, teachers prefer to use certain techniques of transmission rather than others. For example, they may prefer verbal comments to hands-on explanations, or rare to frequent demonstrations, they may use recorded rather than live accompaniment, or they may teach different material to different students at the same time rather than having different sessions for students of different levels.

I have argued that these choices and teaching methods affect dancers' embodied experience. For instance, verbal comments provide students with an ideal image of the dancing body, even before acquiring the skills; the avoidance of the mirror enhances students' somatic awareness; the learning of the dance technique independently from the repertoire instils that idea that the vocabulary can be changed or 'invented'; the amount of hours dedicated to training suggests a different sense of commitment to the practice and favour a different relationship of the student with the guru; the use of live rather than recorded music during training foresees that the relationships between dancers and musicians can be negotiated, rather than fixed.

Another important point that I introduced in this first part of the chapter is the distinction between the lay and the knowledgeable audience. I have suggested that this distinction informs the delivery, reception and the aesthetic evaluation of a dance performance. In this respect, I have hinted at the aesthetic expectations that characterise the knowledgeable audience, at the emphasis put on maintaining unaltered, rather than challenging the aesthetic canon, at the fact that this distinction between different audiences is used by dancers to claim the value of their exclusive bodily knowledge and to establish the elitist status of their practice.

In the second part of the chapter, I have framed the emergence of Odissi as a classical dance within nationalist and regionalist agendas and their concurrent cultural renaissance. In particular, building on previous scholarship, I have highlighted that the process of classicisation of Indian dances required the identification of literary, architectural and archaeological evidence to prove the antiquity of the artistic forms. I have also mentioned the importance of categories such as 'spirituality', 'Hinduism', 'women', 'elitism' and 'respectability' in the establishment of Indian classical dances and discussed how these categories were acquired and employed in the revival of Odissi. Above all, I have questioned traditional post-colonial readings of Indian cultural practices as product of the emulation of western Orientalist and Romantic rhetoric and I have argued for the need to look at the mutual influences between India and the West, and especially at the meanings individual subjects attribute to cultural practices.

In the last three sections of this chapter, I have introduced the movement and choreographic vocabulary of the dance, drawing attention to certain aesthetic principles, which are relevant to my argument. In particular, I have described some basic elements of the movement vocabulary, in order to show how the body is used in this dance. I have mentioned the separation between upper and lower body, which is an important aspect of dancers' somatic narratives, and the relation between movement and music in both pantomimic and pure dance items. Finally, I have introduced the aesthetic theory of *rasa*, which is deemed to underpin all Indian classical performing arts.

All the issues touched in this chapter will return throughout the dissertation, providing the ground for the development of my argument. In the following chapter, I start to look at how dance practices and discourses inform practitioners' embodied experience, and hence I start to develop the argument defended in this dissertation.

## LAYER IV: *IDENTITIES*

### OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter, I discuss how Odissi practitioners embody and experience social and cultural identities in the practice of dance. In particular, I problematise the claim that, as a performer, the dancer has to ‘become’ the character portrayed in the dance, by ‘forgetting’ her personal identity. In fact, only by forgetting her identity, practitioners argue, will the dancer be eventually able to transcend her ordinary sense of self and to achieve an extraordinary experience in performance.

I suggest that the rhetoric of self-transcendence, that underpins the practice of Odissi dance, is imbued with discourses about ethnic and gender identities. In fact, the way this rhetoric is articulated varies depending on the subjects engaged in the dance practice. In particular, dancers use the discourse about self-transcendence in order to question the inclusion of different subjects in the practice of Odissi. Therefore, in the following pages I examine how discourses about gender and ethnicity inform the practice of Odissi and how Odissi practitioners perceive and articulate them at the somatic level. I suggest that, while expected to transcend their own social and gender identity, dancers are nevertheless required to embody culturally specific values.

I argue that most of the cultural values embedded in the vocabulary and practice of Odissi are related to ideas about gender roles and relationships in force in Odia society. In order

to develop my argument I analyse part of the Odissi movement and choreographic vocabulary, through categories derived from previous ethnographic studies in the area. I conclude the chapter by discussing how Odissi practitioners experience the embodiment of power relationships, especially based on gender identities, as a relative acquisition of agency and as a form of empowerment.

## 1. PERFORMATIVE IDENTITIES

Dancers often contend that training in Odissi is like learning a ‘completely different way of moving’ (Moushumi Joshi, interview). They also assert that, as performers, they are expected to portray a wide array of emotions and psychophysical states. Certainly, many Odissi dancers claim that, in order to master the form, they have to forget their own self and become the character they are enacting in dance. Priyambada Pattnaik described her experience of performing in front of an audience, using the following words:

I do not feel that it is myself there. [It’s something] like a light feeling, not a heavy feeling. [It’s the feeling] that you are not the person, who belongs to this family, or has learnt these things, or has students or friends. [...] You never feel what you are, how you are, your character, how you talk or how you behave. Nothing comes into your mind at that moment. The only thing... you do not think. Naturally comes the feeling of what you are presenting.

Thus, according to Priyambada, a successful experience on stage is one in which the performer is able to completely forget her own identity and totally identify with the character she is presenting.

I argue that the experience of training and performing in Odissi corresponds to a complex rhetoric of ‘self-transcendence’ (Shah, 1998; Shah, 2012; Zarrilli, 1990) that works at different levels and takes different forms, depending on the subjects involved in the

practice. According to this rhetoric, through the dance training the ordinary self of the practitioner is gradually 'erased' or simply 'reshaped' as the extraordinary self of the performer. In other words, training is conceived as a process of psychophysical cultivation, or self-refinement, through which one can eventually achieve an extraordinary experience of the self, or a sense of self-transcendence in performance. This process of self-refinement that the training entails concerns the practitioner's body, mind, identity and sense of self.

As part of this rhetoric of self-transcendence, one is expected to be able to embody a wide range of performative identities. These performative identities are presented in the dance vocabulary as ideal, imaginary, mythological and extraordinary. In fact, Odissi dancers enact a world of gods, semi-gods, anti-gods, animals and natural elements. Even when the performer portrays an ordinary human being, she does so always as part of an imaginary, although realistic, world. By embodying a whole universe of characters, the dancer also enacts a wide range of psychophysical and emotional states, and in so doing she experiences extraordinary states of the body and the mind. Although this happens only temporarily and imaginarily, through the embodiment of a multiplicity of psychophysical states the dancer's sense of self temporarily transcends its unique subjectivity.

The experience of an extraordinary embodied self, and hence of a sense of transcendence of the ordinary self is certainly more evident in pantomimic items. However, this experience takes place also in pure dance. In fact, I argue that the highly stylised technique and the particular way in which the body is used while dancing bring the practitioner within an experiential 'corporeality', which is distinctively aesthetic and performative, and as such experienced as extraordinary. Foster (1996) has explained the notion of 'corporeality' in relation to:

the study of bodies through a consideration of bodily reality, not as natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience. (xi)

Thus, corporeality is for Foster the reality of the body as a cultural category. By using this term and by arguing that, through dance, Odissi practitioners access an extraordinary corporeality, I want to mark a distinction between an ordinary and an extraordinary bodily reality, without excluding that these two corporealities are both culturally informed and even define each other.

The fact that the corporeality of Odissi is experienced as extraordinary is demonstrated by dancers' descriptions of the movement vocabulary as 'unnatural' and 'awkward'. For instance, guru Ratikant Mohapatra explained that Odissi dance technique is 'unnatural' because, in doing the basic steps, the dancer has to keep hips and arms exaggeratedly open and bent. In fact, the dance vocabulary of Odissi is constructed upon a very stylised way of using the body that transports, so to speak, the dancer into a different bodily dimension, where her ordinary bodiliness is temporarily suspended.

The extraordinary character of the bodily reality instantiated by the practice of Odissi is also constructed on the temporal and spatial level. In fact, through the enactment of certain ritual gestures, the dancer marks the time and space of dance as distinct from ordinary temporal and spatial reality.<sup>47</sup> This is especially achieved with the performance of the *bhūmi praṇāṁ* at the beginning and at the end of the dance practice. The *bhūmi praṇāṁ* is a stylised ritual gesture, through which the dancer requests blessing to Mother Earth by first touching the dance floor and then the centre of her chest or forehead. Through the performance of the *bhūmi praṇāṁ* the dancer marks the temporal and spatial boundaries of her practice, and in so doing she instantiates an extraordinary temporeality and spatioreality. She defines the space and time of the dance against ordinary space and time. Thus, by embodying extraordinary characters, and by accessing an extraordinary bodily,

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<sup>47</sup> Lemos (2011) has proposed a reading of Indian classical dance practice through Husserl's philosophical tool of 'existential bracketing'.



temporal and spatial reality, the dancer experiences extraordinary states of the body, mind and self, and by doing so she gradually learns to 'forget' her ordinary self.<sup>48</sup>

The training in Odissi consists of two parallel processes, through which the dancer is expected to learn to embody and perform different characters, emotions and psychophysical states, while also learning to 'disembody' her ordinary self, by transcending her own cultural and social identities and the particular bodiliness they entail. This is achieved on the surface level through the standardisation of the dance technique, the costume, the make-up, and even the dance repertoire, by dissuading for example individual and independent choreographic choices.<sup>49</sup> However, it also works on subtler and deeper levels, with the dancer yearning for the experience of complete symbiosis with the dance. Amanda Geroy, in fact, described the performance of a dance master in the following terms: 'He [the dancer] is lost. You do not feel that he is there. He is just not there at all. He is absolutely the character'.

Odissi practitioners often describe this symbiotic experience in terms of 'internalisation'.<sup>50</sup> To internalise the dance is to achieve total control and mastery of the technical skills as well as deep knowledge of the symbolic and narrative meanings that imbue the dance vocabulary. To have internalised the dance is to be able to 'become' the dance or the characters portrayed in the compositions. In this state of symbiosis, the doer and the done are no longer perceived as distinct (Zarrilli, 1990). In fact, dancers consider the higher aesthetic experience for both the performer and the audience the state in which the dance seems to 'speak' by itself. As Kumkum Lal described it, it is a state in which the dance 'has a

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<sup>48</sup> In Layer I, I develop this point looking at how the sense of the 'extraordinary' is constructed through dance practices and discourses. I also explain how, in dancers' narratives, the 'extraordinary' acquires spiritual value.

<sup>49</sup> However, this is true more for dance students, than for mature dancers. In fact, senior performers, having fully absorbed the aesthetics of the form, are allowed to do small variations in the items of the traditional repertoire and eventually to choreograph their own repertory.

<sup>50</sup> See Layer I for a more detailed discussion of the meanings attributed to the process of 'internalisation'.

life of its own, away from the medium, which is the dancer'. Thus, in this state of extraordinary symbiosis, the dancer as an individual with her unique and distinctive subjectivity seems to disappear from the audience's eyes as well as from her own embodied experience. Therefore, internalisation comes when, by virtually 'erasing' her individual identity, the dancer 'becomes' something other than her ordinary self.

The process of internalisation of the dance vocabulary and, therefore, the experience of extraordinary states of the body and the mind that this process entails are not a fortuitous event, but the result of systematic training and practice, in which the practitioner gradually and intentionally learns to forget her sense of self. In fact, as Zarrilli (1990) writes:

By daily practice all physical and mental obstacles in the way of correct practice are gradually eliminated. The goal of all such virtuosic systems is reaching a state of 'accomplishment' (Skt., *siddhi*) in which the doer and the done are one. Through such actualised practice comes both control and transcendence of 'self'. [...] The process of transmission of performance knowledge in such disciplines is one of constant repetition where the neophyte literally mimics the master. [...] The neophyte's "personality" has no place in that process. (131-133)

Thus, Zarrilli suggests that the performer's aesthetic accomplishment, which corresponds to an experience of identification of the dancer with the dance and to a sense of self-transcendence, is pursued through daily practice and imitation. By practicing and mimicking the teacher, the student gradually 'eliminates' the physical and mental obstacles that her ordinary self poses to the complete embodiment of the dance vocabulary. Her personality 'has no place in that process', as Zarrilli states. The extraordinary experience of self-transcendence is the accomplishment of a long and hard training process, rather than an unpredictable occurrence.

I suggest that this experience of self-transcendence concerns one's body, mind, socio-cultural identity and, in general, sense of self. In other words, through training the practitioner's ordinary body, mind, identity and self are gradually 'erased', in order to virtually allow the dance to have 'a life of its own', as Kumkum Lal put it. However, this rhetoric of self-transcendence is imbued with discourses about ethnicity and gender, which question the inclusion of different subjects in the practice of the dance. Therefore, in the following pages, I problematise this rhetoric by examining how the Odissi practitioners interviewed for this research embodied and experienced the discourses about ethnicity and gender woven in the practice of this dance.

## 2. BE(COME)ING ODIA

Although often experienced as extraordinary, dancers argue that the dance vocabulary of Odissi is rooted in Odia culture, in that it is based on values considered distinctive and specific to Odia people. Hence, in this section, I discuss how practitioners mobilise and inflect the issue of self-transcendence in relation to different cultural identities. I suggest that the discourse on the extraordinary corporeality of this dance form and the rhetoric of self-transcendence, which is embedded in the practice of Odissi, are often intertwined with issues of ethnic and national identity. In particular, while for Odia practitioners to achieve self-transcendence means to be able to embody and enact characters, roles and psychophysical states regardless of the performer's own gender, age, social status or physical appearance, for non-Odia practitioners, the process of self-transcendence acquires the tones of ethnic and national 'denial'. To learn Odissi becomes for them an endeavour to conceal 'national accents', an expression used by dancers to refer to one's culturally

specific bodiliness. Amanda Geroy explained what she interpreted as lack of grace in her interpretation of the dance vocabulary in terms of cultural accents, by saying:

Some foreigners have a lot of flexibility, but that is for me where my sort of accent comes in the dance. My foreign accent comes in the lack of grace in my movement.

For many non-Odia practitioners, to train in Odissi means to gradually give up one's own cultural bodiliness in order to acquire the Odia-Odissi bodiliness. Amanda continued commenting on her difficulty in learning an abhinaya piece based on an Odia text:

I think for me it is because the technique is not very natural, because it is this Odia abhinaya, and these movements are very typical... and those are really hard for me, those always feel unnatural.

Amanda's explanation makes the discourse on dance technique slip into a discourse about ethnicity. Indeed, this kind of slippage is very common among Odissi practitioners and, I suggest, is manipulated especially by dancers, who define themselves as Odia, in order to explain the ultimate inaccessibility of the form to non-Odia, let alone non-Hindu practitioners. Along similar lines, guru Ratikant Mohapatra explained the differences between an Odia and a non-Odia dance student, by saying:

Because I am Odia, I speak the language, I know the culture, the attitude, everything, I am Odia. [...] The culture is in *my blood* because I belong to this place. But somebody coming from outside, that *essence*, what I am talking about, is not there within you, you have to learn. You have to go and see things. You have to copy. That is the difference.

Therefore, according to Ratikant Mohapatra, while Odias have the culture and consequently the dance deemed to reflect this culture in their 'blood', non-Odias have to learn it, with the limitations that the learning process entails, against an imaginary 'natural inheritance' or 'essence'.

Following the rhetoric employed by the practitioners I interacted with during my fieldwork, I contend that, in order to be considered, and to feel and consider oneself a 'proper' interpreter of the style, an Odissi dancer has to either 'be' or to 'become' Odia. To be or to become Odia means to fully embody the aesthetics and ethics ascribed to the land where this dance originates (Odisha), to the people this dance form is associated with (Odia) and consequently to the dance form itself. According to this rhetoric, in order to 'be(come)' Odia, one has to be able not only to move, but also to think and feel, at least while dancing, as an Odia would do. It is clear that these discourses are based on an essentialised idea of embodied aesthetics that equates an imaginary 'essence' of Odissi dance to a similarly imaginary 'essence' of Odia people. These discourses are ambivalent, as Ratikant Mohapatra's words show, in that on the one hand they admit that this 'Odia essence' can be learnt, while on the other hand they postulate its ultimately essentialised nature, that can never be fully acquired, if not by birth.

According to this rhetoric, concerning ideas of purity and impurity, authenticity and inauthenticity, only Odia Hindu dancers would be the adequate interpreters of the style, while all other dancers would only be able to conceal a bodiliness that does not belong to the 'true' and 'pure' Odissi aesthetics, and that therefore alters it to a greater or lesser extent. However, this essentialised view of the dance form becomes controversial in people's daily practices and discourses, drawing a complex picture of opinions. It is indeed not unusual that people express divergent ideas when explicitly prompted to talk about the issue, or when indirectly referring to it, in their daily discourses and practices.

As Sujata Mohapatra said during our interview, Odia people have a clear advantage in terms of grasping and understanding the dance aesthetics, but this does not automatically make them good dancers. She argued:

if somebody needs ten days, we understand by ten hours, because all the alphabet, the basic things are closer to our knowledge, then we just put our hard work to learn that physically. So mentally we know, we understand. [...] Odisha is our culture, and being Odia is so close like mother and son, or mother and daughter, mother and child relationship.

Using the metaphor of 'mother and child relationship' Sujata emphasises the 'natural' connection between Odia cultural and Odia practitioners. In other words, the Odia-practitioner is born out of that culture, as a child is born from her mother. Therefore, according to Sujata, although an 'inborn' understanding of the cultural values embedded in the dance vocabulary is a clear advantage for the practitioner, what eventually makes a dancer is practice, commitment, passion, and the correct guidance of the guru.

The issue whether a foreign practitioner will ever be able to dance like an Odia is frequently debated. When asked to express their opinion on the topic, all of my informants promptly admitted that it would not be impossible, although it is certainly difficult for a non-Odia to dance as an Odia. However, for this to happen, the dancer has to spend as much time as possible acquainting herself with the culture of Odia people. Practitioners articulate this 'getting acquainted with the Odia way of doing things', by arguing that one has to visit Hindu temples, eat Indian food and go to the villages of Odisha to observe people's behaviour, especially the way they talk and they walk. Ratikant Mohapatra explained to me:

you are coming to Odisha to learn Odissi dance, this is not a dance form which belongs to your country, you are coming and learning the dance, and learning the culture and learning the way we Odia people talk and behave, and the manners. And you will find all this in the dance form.

Ratikant Mohapatra is suggesting that while Odia practitioners have the dance in their 'blood', non-Odias have to learn Odia culture in order to be able to dance correctly. They have to 'become' Odia as much as they can, by learning to talk and to behave as Odias do.

Thus, like most Odissi practitioners I interviewed, he equates Odissi dance to the state of Odisha and to its cultural identity.

In daily discourses and practices, it is very common to get the impression that, regardless of her dedication, a non-Odia dancer will never be an authentic and genuine interpreter, as her inauthenticity, sooner or later, and often in unexpected and unconscious ways, will be revealed by her bodily language. This was clearly articulated by Kavita Dwibedi, one of my informants who, despite being Odia, was born, raised and had spent most of her life in New Delhi. She said:

Even if I am born somewhere in different parts of the world, my Odia identity or Odia feeling, or flavour, will not go away, because I have inherited it from my parents. Family is a very important factor for somebody's growth... culture-wise. Of course, I have always seen the dance, the festival and the cuisine. And for the dance of course it comes, even if a dancer from Odisha stands, one can make out that 'yes, she is Odia!' [...] I feel it is inborn. The inheritance of what your whole system or ambience is... you depict it on stage. But I have seen students also, who are not Odia, but who are trying to do Odissi. Definitely they are trying to reach that point, but yes, point one per cent, somehow it is not matching.

This ultimately essentialist discourse does not concern only foreign practitioners. In fact, when these ideas come from an Odia dancer, they are also applied to non-Odia Indians, on the basis that their bodily language would betray a different flavour in their dance, a flavour that is essentially foreign to the 'pure' and 'authentic' version of the Odia interpreter. In fact, Kavita continued, explaining that:

The other day somebody was telling me that - she is of course a very experienced woman, and she has seen dancers from all over the world - 'yes, the ones who have the dance specific to that region, it shows', and she said 'I don't know what it is, but it shows. A South Indian dancer dancing Bharatanatyam will definitely be there, but a North Indian dancing Bharatanatyam, you can make out'.

Therefore, according to this rhetoric, dancers carry in their bodiliness an identity, which is considered more or less compatible with the Odia/Odissi ideal bodiliness and that perhaps can never be completely erased although it can be concealed under the mastery of the dance technique.

Although these claims are certainly manipulated by dancers in order to articulate issues of ethnic or national identity and consequently to question the inclusion of certain subjects in the practice of the dance, they can be fully understood only if interpreted within a more general rhetoric of self-transcendence in performance, as a process that requires the negation of one's own individual identity. This aspiration towards self-transcendence concerns all Odissi practitioners, regardless of their geographical or cultural origins. It also acquires spiritual value, being associated with the experience of mokṣa or liberation from material life.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, these discourses concerning foreign practitioners are only a specific but not unique way in which the process of self-transcendence is articulated in the practice of this performing art. However, I suggest that practitioners manipulate and inflect the rhetoric of self-transcendence, common to Indian performing and martial arts (Chakravorty, 2008; Shah, 1998; Zarrilli, 1990) in order to articulate nationalist and regionalist discourses, using ethnic categories, as well as ideas about purity and impurity, authenticity and inauthenticity in an essentialist sense. While for Odia practitioners it is 'only' a matter of being able to transcend one's own social identity, gender, age and social status, for non-Odia as well as for foreign practitioners, this endeavour is further complicated by the need to conceal, if not erase, one's own cultural identity. I have argued that opinions about the success of this endeavour are ambiguous, as it is uncertain whether non-Odia dancers will ever be able to 'authentically' interpret the form.

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<sup>51</sup> See the last chapter, Layer I, for a full examination of the experience of self-transcendence.



It is clear that, from the perspective of Odia practitioners, transcending the self does not imply transcending aesthetic and ethic values that are ascribed to Odia identity, but rather fully portraying them in a wide array of characters, roles and psychophysical states. In other words, transcending the self does not involve transcending cultural values, rather embodying these values in a more complete way. It is in these discourses, that intertwine the rhetoric of self-transcendence with issues of national and ethnic identities, that the political nature of Odissi practice seeps into the embodied experience of transnational dancers.

In the following section, I take into account how culturally specific values enter into the daily practice and embodied experience of the dance. In particular, I argue that the 'essence' of Odissi is mainly constructed on a specific way of conceiving gender roles and relationships. I suggest that the way gender identities and relationships are portrayed and experienced in dance is broadly coherent with moral codes dominant in Odia society, as described and discussed by previous ethnographic studies in the field. In particular, I draw on ethnographic research carried out among Hindu Brahmin families of the Old Temple Town of Bhubaneswar, capital of Odisha (Menon, 2000, 2002, 2011, 2013b; Menon and Shweder, 1994, 2001; Shweder, 2003). However, I do not argue that gender roles, as they are portrayed in dance, necessarily reflect the reality of social life. They rather work as ideal moral models that guide behaviour. I also suggest that gender roles and relationships, as represented in Odissi dance, are the syncretic result of a complex mixture of values that indistinguishably derives both from local indigenous categories and traditions and from colonial and post-colonial pan-Indian discourses about sexuality, morality and respectability in relation to gender.

### 3. GENDERING DANCE, TROUBLING IDENTITIES

When asked to describe Odissi dance, practitioners would invariably say that it is a very graceful style, and perhaps the most feminine among all Indian classical dance forms.<sup>52</sup>

They would further explain the graceful and feminine character of this dance by mentioning the predominance of circular movements, especially in the upper body and limbs. But, above all, they would argue that it is the torso movement that gives Odissi its unique feminine flavour and distinguishes it from other classical dance styles. Although clichéd discourses portray Odissi simplistically as a graceful and feminine dance, I argue that an embodied understanding of the dance vocabulary, together with an examination of the dance practice and of the discourses embedded in it, reveals a much more complex scenario in which definitions of gender identities are at stake.

In this and the following section, I problematise the attributes of the feminine and graceful as they are articulated in Odissi, showing the multi-layered meanings entailed by these categories. I contend that Odissi incarnates a very specific way of conceiving gender identities and gender relationships. I develop my argument by focusing on the feminine, as it is this category that is given more explicit articulation in the dance vocabulary. In fact, I argue that the feminine is the main ‘product’ of the dance practice. In this dance the feminine is defined in relation to the masculine, while the masculine is conceived as functional to the construction of the feminine, and as the precondition for a ‘domesticated’, that is aesthetically and morally acceptable, feminine. In short, the feminine provides the perspective through which both genders and their mutual relationships are defined and depicted. I suggest that these gender identities emerge from

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<sup>52</sup> It is worth noticing that the attribute of ‘gracefulness’ is not only claimed by Odissi dancers. During my fieldwork in New Delhi, I realised that, regardless of the classical dance style practitioners were training in they would always consider it graceful. While the discourse about gracefulness in dance is arguably shared by all Indian classical dances, I examine here how this is distinctively articulated in the practice of Odissi.

a complex dynamic where local categories interact with colonial and post-colonial discourses about sexuality, respectability and morality.

Odissi dance vocabulary is apparently constructed around precise ideas of what is feminine and what is masculine, and according to strict, although often implicit, aesthetic codes that define the way the feminine and the masculine should be portrayed in dance. In fact, in Indian performing arts tradition a distinction is drawn between feminine and masculine movements, or more precisely between movements which are executed with a feminine quality, and movements which are executed with a masculine quality. Hence, at least in principle, movements *per se* are not essentially gendered, but they become gendered depending on the way they are performed. However, dancers tend to define circular, continuous and indirect movements as feminine, and linear, discrete and direct movements as masculine.

To define the feminine and the masculine qualities that a dance movement can have, Indian performing arts rhetoric employs the categories of *tāṇḍava* and *lāsya*.<sup>53</sup> *Tāṇḍava* and *lāsya* are two mythological terms that describe respectively the dances of the ‘undomesticated’ Lord Śiva, taken by popular culture as a symbol of ascetic life and material austerity and associated with the sense of time, and the dance of his wife, the goddess Pārvatī, the ‘domesticated’ incarnation of the female divine principle, *śakti*.<sup>54</sup> Thus, *lāsya* is used as an attribute to define graceful, soft, gentle and, for that matter, feminine movements, while *tāṇḍava* is used to describe movements, which are executed with power, strength, vigour, boldness and that, as such, are considered masculine. In the case of Odissi, dancers normally associate the *lāsya* quality to the movements of the upper body, from the waist up, and the *tāṇḍava* quality to the movements of the legs and feet, from the waist down. This is because, most of the time, torso and arms execute circular, continuous and indirect

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<sup>53</sup> On *tāṇḍava* and *lāsya* see Bake (1955).

<sup>54</sup> On the distinction between domesticated and undomesticated gods, see Pattanaik (2006).

movements, while legs and feet are used to create rhythmic patterns, and hence discrete sounds, by stamping the feet on the floor with strength.

Dancers often speak of 'female-oriented' or 'male-oriented' dances to describe movements or choreographic items in which respectively more grace or more strength is required.

Many dancers claim that Odissi is mostly a female-oriented dance, although within its traditional repertoire there are some choreographic items which are more *tāṇḍava*, and others which are more *lāsya*. Normally the *tāṇḍava* and *lāsya* quality in a dance composition is determined respectively by the preponderance of male or female characters in pantomimic dance or of *cauka* or *tribhaṅga* positions in items of pure dance. *Cauka* is loosely considered a more masculine stance, while *tribhaṅga* a more feminine stance. Sometimes, the distinction between male-oriented and female-oriented items depends more on whether the emphasis in the composition is put on the rhythmic footwork or on the circular, continuous and indirect movements of the upper body. However, most of the time this distinction is not so clear and sometimes it is simply untenable. For this reason, dancers tend to speak of female-oriented or male-oriented dances, rather than, more unequivocally, of female or male dances.

In fact, dancers know and argue that both *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* require strength and grace, although while the former stance can look feminine, thanks to the movements of torso and arms, the latter normally does not look masculine because of the emphasis it always gives to the curves of the feminine body. However, even the *tribhaṅga* stance is used to represent certain masculine characters in pantomimic dance. In fact, especially in the case of pantomimic dance, I suggest that the distinction between feminine and masculine movements is 'troubled' by the psychophysical profile of the characters portrayed in the dance. Just as there are female characters who are the embodiment of power, such as

Durgā,<sup>55</sup> and whose body language is often represented in dance through the use of *cauka* and in general with a *tāṇḍava* quality, especially when she acquires her most terrific and destructive forms, so there are male characters, such as Lord Kṛṣṇa, who are portrayed as ‘sweet’, ‘cheeky’ or ‘mischievous’ and hence require softer more *lāsya* movements and the use of *tribhaṅga*.

Dancers argue that choreographic items which are predominantly *lāsya* or which portray mostly female characters are more suitable to female dancers, while *tāṇḍava* dances are more appropriate to male dancers. However, they also claim that ultimately, as a performer, one has to be able to embody both male and female characters, and to convey both *tāṇḍava* and *lāsya* qualities in his or her dance. Dancers further clarify how one can fully embody the qualities of the opposite gender. While they admit, as I said, that for women it is easier to perform *lāsya*, and for men to perform *tāṇḍava* movements, they also contend that each individual naturally has a certain combination of both qualities, often described as energies (Ileana Citaristi, interview). In fact, it is clear to most of my informants that there is no straightforward correspondence between femininity and womanhood or between masculinity and manhood.

Although women naturally have and express their feminine energy, and men naturally have and display their masculine attitude, there are female dancers who have a more masculine energy and male dancers who have a more feminine energy. It is exactly because each individual has potentially both feminine and masculine energies that one potentially is able to perform the ‘attitudes’ and behaviour of the other sex. This seems to contradict what Menon (2013b) argues in relation to gender in Odia society; she writes that according to Odia people ‘male and female are the only two castes (*jatis*) in the world whose differences

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<sup>55</sup> Durgā is considered a form of Devi, the female Hindu goddess *par excellence*. Durgā is one of the fieriest deities of the Hindu pantheon. She is normally represented as riding a tiger or a lion and using mortal weapons to defeat threatening demons.

are so profound that they can never be transcended' (82).<sup>56</sup> Dancers do not deny that men and women are 'naturally' different. However, while they naturalise social gender, conflating it with sex, they also admit the existence of another category, the category of energy, which can be gendered either as feminine or as masculine. They contend that each individual has her own predominant 'energy', regardless of the subject's actual sex and social gender, and depending on this personal energy one will be more 'spontaneously' able to embody the *tāṇḍava* or the *lāsya* quality in dance.

Dancers argue that normally the challenge for the female performer is to develop strength and power, while for the male performer is to be able to portray the grace which dancers consider distinctive of Odissi dance, without looking 'effeminate'. Dancers contend that a male performer who looks effeminate shows a lack of understanding or expertise and hence reveals the superficiality of his knowledge of the dance. Therefore, while female dancers' technical dexterity and expertise is judged in relation to the stamina, strength and control they are able to display, with their grace being taken for granted, the evaluation of a male performance immediately raises reflections on his interpretation of the dance's distinctive grace, with thoughts about whether he looked effeminate or not. This suggests that women and men have very different challenges in respect to the embodiment of the dance vocabulary. On the one hand, women have to look gentle and soft, as they 'normally' and 'naturally' are believed to be, but they also have to develop strength, power and control, incorporating it in their dance and concealing these masculine qualities beyond the gentleness of their movements. On the other hand, men have to look gentle, but not so gentle that they look 'effeminate'.

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<sup>56</sup> Although Indian culture is normally constructed on a 'naturalised' distinction based on sex differences, there is similarly a long tradition of gender identities which escape such 'natural' dichotomy, and that are widely normalised and integrated in society. See Nanda's (1990, 2000) work on Indian *hijras*.

The issue of male dancers looking effeminate because of a lack of understanding or, as guru Ratikant Mohapatra proposed, because of a 'natural' inclination, is a constant in the discourses about dance performance. For instance, guru Ratikant Mohapatra argued:

Many times, males are there that are effeminate... their attitude is like that, they are born like that. Few others are there that try to act as female, maybe because the dance would look good... I do not know what they think! But there are good dancers who do equally female and male parts. It is your understanding.

Thus, according to my informant, there are men who are naturally effeminate, and this, Ratikant seems to imply, cannot be changed, as it is an inborn characteristic. Then, there are men who look effeminate perhaps because they think, as Ratikant hypothesises, that in this way their dance would look better. And finally, there are men who are just good performers and as such they are able to adequately interpret both male and female roles. According to Ratikant, unless one naturally has this inclination, a man who looks effeminate in dance is the one who has not understood the character and the dance, and hence is, whether consciously or not, 'confused'.

Kumkum Lal also argued that male dancers often show superficiality in their interpretation of the dance and hence a lack of deep understanding of what they are portraying.

Remembering guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, she said:

Guruji was doing the feminine role, but not effeminate. Many dancers, who are not competent enough, they do the female role, but they look they are males doing some woman... you know... so it's superficial! Whereas in Guruji, you never thought that this is a man dancing. You just saw the woman dancing.

These words confirm that if a male dancer looks effeminate it is mostly because of his lack of understanding and competence. When Kumkum says, during the interview, that some male performers look like men enacting a woman attitude, and utters that this is

superficial, she is arguing that these dancers have not been able to ‘erase’ their own gender identity and to ‘become’ the character they are portraying. Hence, they are confusing their own identity with that of the mythological character in the dance. In other words, for male dancers the matter is not to confuse their own gender identity with that of the character they are portraying, while for women the matter is to be able to incorporate and conceal the qualities of the other gender, something that is deemed to render more aesthetically appealing and morally acceptable the natural qualities of their own gender.

The transformation of the performer into the character is epitomised by guru Kelucharan’s interpretation of the female character of Rādhā. Confirming Kumkum’s and Ratikant’s view, Sujata Mohapatra also argued that:

when a male dances a woman thing, it depends upon the calibre of an artist, how much powerful you are, how much you understand the concept, the content, and how do you represent being a female. [...] As I always feel, my Guruji is the best example. He was a male, but everybody knows that he was the best Rādhā, the best nāyikā.<sup>57</sup> So, just think one [man with] bald hair, if he can show the 16 years old character [Rādhā] so beautifully. And in front of that man, all women will be ignorant!

Paradoxically then, the best interpreter of a female role is an old and bald man, with face marked by smallpox, and teeth consumed by *pān*.<sup>58</sup> I suggest that guru Kelucharan’s interpretation of the female role acquires even more significance because of the distinctive character of the woman of whom he is considered to be the highest interpreter. In fact, Rādhā,<sup>59</sup> which occupies an unquestionable role in the Mohapatra repertoire, is the

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<sup>57</sup> Nāyikā is the term used to indicate the heroine of a drama.

<sup>58</sup> This is the description that dancers normally give of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Pān is a preparation of betel leaf, areca nut and tobacco. It is chewed and has a stimulating effect. Its use reddens the teeth and mouth.

<sup>59</sup> See later in this chapter for a fuller examination of Rādhā character in guru Kelucharan’s repertoire.



epitome of the 'new' Indian woman as defined within colonial and post-colonial nationalist narratives (Chatterjee, 1989, 1993).

The paradox that guru Kelucharan Mohapatra incarnates with his sublime representation of the young Rādhā seems to Odissi practitioners, in fact, very logical. Being an artist of high calibre and of unquestionable performative skills, guru Kelucharan Mohapatra was able to accomplish the ultimate aim of any artistic endeavour: self-transcendence and absolute identification with the character. Only the dancer who has achieved complete control over the technique is able to forget her own sense of self, and to allow the audience to forget it, as well. Therefore, guru Kelucharan Mohapatra is taken as the epitome of what an artist should aim for.

I propose that the categories of the masculine and the feminine as portrayed and experienced in Odissi are troubled at different levels. In particular, these categories are complicated by several socio-historical, as well as cultural circumstances, which are embedded in the dance vocabulary, as well as in the dance discourses and practices. For instance, one cannot avoid noticing that Odissi dance vocabulary has been largely created and systematised by gurus who were men. Hence, one would expect the dance to reflect men's views about how women are and how they should be. However, one will also have to take into account that guru Kelucharan Mohapatra belonged to the gotipua tradition, which in turn was considered a reinterpretation of the banned māsāris' dance, and in part even a caricature of it (Roy, 2009). It cannot pass unnoticed either that the gotipua dancers were young boys, rather than strictly men, training and dancing in their pre-pubertal age. In addition to all this, one must also consider that one of the more common themes of the repertoire of the gotipua, as well as of local folk theatre troupes, whom guru Kelucharan had long belonged to, was Kṛṣṇa's *rāsālīlā*.

As already explained in the Introduction, the *rāsālīlā* is the mythological amorous play that Lord Kṛṣṇa entertained with the thousand maidens of Vrindavana. The *rasalīlā* is a key symbolic and metaphoric image of the bhakti movement, where the devotion towards the god is metaphorically transposed into terms of erotic love where the devotee is always represented as female, and the god always as male. Therefore, in the bhakti movement, whether man or woman, the devotee is always considered female. The story of Kṛṣṇa's amorous play in Vrindavana, and of his special love story with Rādhā, provides one of the favourite mythological themes guru Kelucharan Mohapatra used in choreographing his Odissi abhinaya items.

From this perspective, Odissi dance and the way gender identities are conceived in this dance style cannot be straightforwardly considered a portrayal of women as men would like them to be, but rather they must be understood in a wider and more complicated net of gender relationships, where there is no clear division between 'definers' and 'defined' (Menon and Shweder, 1998).<sup>60</sup> Therefore, in order to understand gender discourses in Odissi dance it is necessary to question simplistic dichotomies between male and female artistic depictions.

It is also arguable that the way the masculine and feminine are portrayed and interact in this dance practice is in part derived from colonial and post-colonial discourses about gender and it depends on how these discourses have been influenced by the coloniser's morality. In fact, I suggest that the way the feminine and the masculine are represented in Odissi is the result of this complex ideological mixture of local and non-local values. In this respect, it is arguable that the moralities of the coloniser and the colonised mutually adjusted in order to respond perhaps to different specific purposes, but in fact to common

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<sup>60</sup> In problematising gender identities in the practices and discourses about Odissi, I am especially inspired by Coorlawala's (1996) objection against the validity, in Indian classical dance, of Mulvey's (1975) theory of the audience as the embodiment of a male gaze.

historical needs. Thus, ideas about gender, as we find them developed in Odissi dance, are the result of these mutual ideological influences.

In short, in this section I have examined how the categories of the masculine and the feminine are conceived in Odissi movement and choreographic vocabulary, and how these categories interact with the practitioners' gender identities. I have also problematised the distinction between the masculine and feminine, and I have suggested that these attributes assume different meanings depending on the subjects involved in the practice.

In the two following sections, I focus on how these categories are conceived and experienced in relation to each other, and on how these aesthetic relations can be understood through moral categories that concern gender interactions in Odia society. In particular, I discuss how the category of 'grace' is constructed in Odissi and how it incarnates the higher representation of the feminine in dance. I argue that 'grace', which is considered the distinctive quality of Odissi dance vocabulary, can be understood only within a gendered relationship between the feminine and the masculine. Hence, I explain how these gender relationships are embodied, experienced and performed in Odissi, looking at both the movement vocabulary and at the psychological profile of some of the most important characters portrayed in the classical repertoire of the dance form, in particular at the character of Rādhā.

## 4. DOMESTICATING THE FEMALE ENERGY

Although clichéd discourses emphasise the gracefulness of Odissi, associating it with the predominance of *lāsya* movements in the movement vocabulary, dancers adamantly claim

that Odissi requires strength and power in order to be danced 'correctly'.<sup>61</sup> In fact, while dancers argue that there is no Odissi without grace, where grace is taken as the intrinsic and essential feature of this style, they also contend that there is no grace without strength, power and stamina, all attributes normally considered masculine and associated with the *tāṇḍava* quality.

Thus, there is a sort of ambiguity or disagreement between official discourses that stress the feminine character of the dance, and practitioners' direct embodied experiences, that call attention to the strength required by this dance. Priyambada Pattanaik articulated this ambiguity, when she said: 'Odissi is not soft, but the form is soft. It is a very strong form, but the feeling is very soft.' Thus, her words arguably express the complex character of embodied experience in Odissi. Dancers know that this style is at the same time soft and strong, graceful and powerful. However, they also know that their strength and power must be concealed under the feminine grace that Odissi aesthetics has to display.<sup>62</sup>

Dancers often highlight that the strength required in Odissi is not only physical but also mental. The need for physical strength is related to the fact that most dance movements are executed keeping the knees bent in *cauka* or *tribhaṅga*, while stamping the feet on the floor with vigour and precision, in order to create rhythmic patterns. All dancers interviewed during my fieldwork claimed that they had been overwhelmed, especially at the beginning of their training, by the difficulty of 'sitting' in *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* practically all the time. In fact, when asked during the interview to recall and describe their first Odissi class, the only thing all of them would clearly remember and mention was that they had felt pain in their legs.

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<sup>61</sup> I put 'correctly' in inverted commas to draw attention to its contextual meaning.

<sup>62</sup> I do not take here into further account the embodied experience of male dancers, as I did not have the opportunity to gather extensive data among them. However, the two male dancers that I interviewed employed the same 'ambiguous' rhetoric of female dancers, saying that although Odissi dance looks soft and gentle, in fact it requires the dancer to develop power and strength.

While senior practitioners tend to dismiss the experience of physical pain, arguing that all dance styles are difficult and painful especially at the beginning of the training, it cannot pass unnoticed that this experience constantly recurs in dancers' somatic narratives. Certainly, the dance vocabulary offers the means to conceal this experience of pain. In fact, as part of the dance's aesthetic code, the dancer is expected to smile and display a pleasurable facial expression, no matter what she is actually feeling and thinking. Thus, by smiling, dancers learn to gradually 'forget' the pain and to just enjoy the dance. They do so through what they call 'mental strength'.<sup>63</sup> The daily practice is especially meant to build stamina and develop strength in the body and in the mind, by gradually concealing and erasing the experience of pain from dancers' embodied experience.

Strength is considered necessary in order to dance in an aesthetically correct and appealing way. To dance correctly means, for dancers, to be graceful, while maintaining technical precision, clear footwork and clean bodylines. It also means to keep the lower body grounded and strong all the time, while moving the upper body with suppleness and resilience. According to dancers, by developing physical strength one is able to control the whole body, so that each limb is moved according to the requirements of the dance's aesthetic code. Speaking of the 'perfect' performer, Amanda Geroy said that:

the dancer should have full control over all the instruments. She should be able to move one small part with control, so that everything is deliberated, nothing is not deliberated.

Therefore, aesthetic appeal in dance comes with full control of the body, and full control is possible, according to dancers, only with the acquisition of physical and mental strength. However, practitioners explain, the dancer has to conceal the fact that she is controlling her body. In order to explain this point, Amanda mentioned her guru's performance, saying that:

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<sup>63</sup> See Layer I for a more detailed examination of the experience of pain and of the culturally specific meanings that dancers use when dealing with it.

Sujata is totally controlled, but you never see that she is controlling. I mean, it never looks tightly controlled, this idea of control with fluidity.

Sonali Mishra described this 'control with fluidity' in terms of 'spontaneity'. 'You know' – she said – 'that kind of spontaneity, I think, should be very natural, it should not be forced'. In short, dancers argue that one cannot dance correctly without having first developed strength and control over her body and over her mind.<sup>64</sup> However, the really graceful dancer is ultimately the one who is able to conceal this control and to look as if everything she is doing is spontaneous, whereas clearly it is not.

The idea of control, which is crucial to the practice and somatic experience of Odissi, explains how grace depends on strength and therefore how the aesthetically appealing feminine is created through its relation with the masculine. Ultimately, I suggest that the rhetoric of control defines the way women have to monitor their bodies, in order to make them aesthetically and morally appropriate. In fact, the graceful in Odissi dance is the result of the control of the masculine over the feminine, in particular over the undomesticated feminine. But here I need to further articulate the concept of the feminine.

I have said above that *lāsya*, as synonym of grace, is associated with the goddess *Pārvatī*, and I have briefly mentioned that this female deity is identified as Lord *Śiva*'s wife and considered the 'domesticated' incarnation of the female divine power, *Śakti*. Odisha is considered an area in which the cult of the female energetic principle of *śakti* historically enjoyed a notable development (Menon, 2002). Although *śakti* is not an exclusive attribute of women, it is women that according to the local cosmology are endowed with a higher degree of *śakti*. *Śakti* is in itself considered a 'raw' form of power, and as such 'asocial' in principle. In order to become socially acceptable, *dharmic*, which means moral, female *śakti* must be regulated. Menon (2002) explains this point through the following words:

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<sup>64</sup> See Layer II for an examination of the role of the mind in exercising 'control' over the body.

For Hindu women to become powerful, it is necessary for them to remake their śakti through culturally prescribed actions and transform the śakti given by nature into moral power and authority - a cultural artefact. (140) [...] For śakti to be fruitful and productive, it has to be contained and strictly controlled, through exercising one's ability to discriminate. (147)

According to Menon, for Odia Hindu women, a way to control this śakti is by acknowledging subordination towards and dependency on men. In other words, in this local cosmology, the feminine energy is considered extremely powerful, but such power becomes productive and constructive, and eventually socially and aesthetically acceptable, only when it is controlled by and depends on the masculine element. However, as Menon (2000) makes clear, this control is not imposed, but has to 'come from within'. It is 'self-control'.

Oriya Hindus believe that family structures and external checks are relatively ineffective in controlling human behaviour. For such control to be truly effective and enduring, the impulse must come from within. There are available culturally defined means that enable one to nurture and cultivate this impulse. (86-87)

Śakti is also related to women's reproductive capacities. It is this reproductive power that śakti entails that makes women at the same time so powerful, but also so 'dangerous' for the maintenance of the social system. In fact, if unrestrained, this power that women possess and that is, after all, sexual power, can be highly destructive for their families and hence for society at large. In order for this power to become socially acceptable and constructive, rather than destructive, it must be regulated. By being able to regulate their power, women 'are capable of turning the undoable into the doable and the impossible into the possible' (Menon, 2013: 196).

A similar rhetoric applies to Odissi dance vocabulary. In fact, Odissi stages a controlled and moralised form of feminine power. I suggest that the grace, which is the pivotal element of

Odissi aesthetics, is the performance of a controlled and socialised form of female sexual power. In particular, this control is intended as self-control. In short, the vocabulary of this dance is constructed around a very clear tension between an emphasis on the one hand on female sexual power, and on the other hand on the importance of constant self-control and self-restraint. This tension is incarnated in the performance of *lajyā* and *abhimāna*, two aesthetic principles and moral attitudes that are often both directly and indirectly mentioned in the dance vocabulary, and which I examine in detail in the following section.

## 5. POETICS OF GRACE: SHAME AND PRIDE

In the previous section I have suggested that the performance of grace depends on the dancer's capacity to develop strength, both on the physical and the mental level, and on her ability to use this strength to exercise some form of control over the dancing body and hence over the dance skills. According to Odissi practitioners, only by achieving full control of the dancing body can one's dance be truly appealing. In this section, by analysing some relevant aspects of the dance movement and choreographic vocabulary, I examine how this self-control is actually exercised and experienced in the practice of the dance. In particular, I argue that the attitudes of *lajyā* and *abhimāna* epitomise this value of self-control, which is crucial to the dance's aesthetic code and to the practitioners' somatic narratives.

As Menon (2011) suggests, the Odia term *lajyā* is widely translated with the English words 'shame, modesty, shyness', and sometimes, even 'coyness'. My informant Sonali Mishra attempted to explain *lajyā* in the following way:

In so many dances you see it [*lajyā*]. It is 'shy', but... the way I have seen it done in dance - because I have noticed different interpretations - it is shy like shame, but modesty and coyness, too. There are certain matters between male and female interactions. You know, in



the West, if a boy likes you and sees you, the boy talks to you, you talk too, you do not feel any... but here [in Odisha] there is this interaction where certain things... you [as a woman] do not feel like talking. There is a certain kind of hesitancy. It is a kind of wall...

Along similar lines, Shweder (2003) writes:

If you ask bilingual Oriya-to-English speakers to translate *lajya* into English, they are likely to select words such as "shame," "shy," "modest," "embarrassed," or "bashful." They might even say "coy." But what do they really mean? All of those terms, depending on the context, will be associated by Oriya Brahmins with various customary signs of *lajya*, such as a look of downcast eyes, the gesture of biting one's tongue or veiling one's face, a movement of physical withdrawal or retreat. (1124)

However, none of the terms here mentioned seems to be able to fully explain the meaning that this word has for Odia Hindu people, especially when attributed to women. In fact, while this term can be used for both men and women, *lajyā* is considered particularly desirable for the latter. Therefore, *lajyā* is an ideal characteristic for women. Menon argues that while expected from young girls, *lajyā* is considered an impediment when displayed by women recently married. In fact, *lajyā* is associated with a heightened sense of self-awareness (Menon, 2011: 26), which in this early phase of marriage is deemed to hinder the assimilation of a woman into the new household. According to this interpretation, *lajyā* has to do with the sense of self in relation to other social actors, in particular to men and to the patriarchal system, and with the sense of self-transformation that a woman undergoes when passing from an unmarried to a married status.

*Lajyā* is an important aesthetic principle that regulates Odissi dance vocabulary and has an equally strong moral value and a shared cultural meaning. In other words, I suggest that the categories of the feminine and the graceful are constructed in Odissi around the idea of

lajyā, which is the result of the self-control that women exercise over their own desires and, as I will discuss, dissatisfactions towards men in respect of a patriarchal morality.

One of the clearest ways in which this attitude of lajyā is enacted in Odissi is through a specific and partly codified use of the gaze. In fact, especially in pure dance the eyes are often used in side-to-side and outward-inward motions, so describing an imaginary trajectory from an external 'real' and precise focus to a more inwards, downcast, almost internal, focus. In fact, in their learning process, dancers are often invited to imagine and in fact they are portrayed as if they were interacting with an imaginary presence. Dancers are often told to embody a feeling of smart and accommodating shyness. In some sections of pure dance, the dancer may look at her hand as if it was an imaginary mirror, alternatively glancing at it and then casting inviting gazes outwards. She performs a half-reluctant and half-compliant gaze, struggling, I suggest, between moral norms and personal feelings.

Although Indian classical dancers normally contend that pure dance does not convey any particular meaning, nor represents any particular character, it is evident that nr̥tta is not simply a rhythmic and melodic elaboration of both dance movement and music. I suggest that in pure dance the dancer is expected to embody a particular mood, attitude, emotion, and psychophysical state, and that therefore the attribute of 'pure' as used in relation to non-pantomimic dance conceals a very specific portrayal of gender identity. In the particular case of Odissi, all these psychophysical features define a specific character, that of a young maiden who is conscious of her sexual power and of her capacity to make choices. These choices pertain to her relationships with a male character, although this character is most of the time purely imaginary.

However, during our interview, Sharon Lowen complained against the interpretation of the dancer as a flirting maiden that, according to her, is particularly enacted by young girls and that is a distortion of the original Odissi. This suggests that perhaps there has been a

change in the aesthetics of the dance. In fact, many performer of the older generation often complained, during the interviews, that the devotional and intimate character of Odissi dance had been lost in the last few decades. In general, it seems that the closer the performer is to the character she or he is enacting, for instance sharing the character's age or physical features, the more difficult is for the performer to be able to transcend his or her personal identity. Just as young girls are not deemed able to perform the 'correct' village maiden, women too are less capable than guru Kelucharan Mohapatra in performing female characters, and in fact the very specific character of Rādhā who has a particular symbolic relevance. Similarly, young boys look effeminate when performing female roles, perhaps because the gap between the character's bodiliness and their own bodiliness is not yet so evident, as that of an old and bald man can be.

Another example of how the performance of *lajyā* is intertwined with issues of sexual power, choice and self-control, is provided by one of the basic walks of Odissi dance technique. This walk is realised by moving forwards, while following a snake or s-shape. In teaching this walk, Priyambada Patnaik used to invite us to think we were moving towards two imaginary watchers, pretending we were entitled to choose between them, while also showing a certain degree of shyness in front of such circumstances. In presence of the younger students, the teacher would not clarify the gender of these two imaginary presences. However, whenever only the senior and more mature ones were in the class, she would be more explicit in saying that these friends could be imagined as male friends. Therefore, the attitude we were embodying was that of a presumably unmarried girl, who not only displayed a strong sense of self, through the performance of *lajyā*, but also showed the capacity to choose among more than one potential suitor. However, in performing this

walk the dancer only enacts the possibility of choice, because she ultimately moves forwards and does not go towards any of the two imaginary onlookers.<sup>65</sup>

In many pantomimic pieces, female characters often conceal their faces with imaginary veils or using their hand as a screen, while glancing behind it, as if blushing for an intolerable desire.



FIG. 12 PERFORMING LAJYĀ (BY IOANNIS LIGNOS)

The attitude of *lajyā* is particularly predominant in choreographies that portray the troubled love story between Rādhā and Lord Kṛṣṇa. This story, which is narrated in several bhakti poems and is part of Hindu popular culture, finds its highest literary form in the *Gīta Govinda*, a poem written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the poet Jayadeva. The *Gīta Govinda* provides the textual base to many pantomimic items of the classical Odissi repertoire, and especially of guru Kelucharan's choreographies.

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<sup>65</sup> Arguably guru Kelucharan Mohapatra would have never choreographed a vulgar woman that, free from self-control, abandons herself to a man, although in one of his most debated choreographies, Rādhā is portrayed with Kṛṣṇa, after they have spent the night together. See later in this chapter.

According to this story, Rādhā was a married woman who fell in love with Lord Kṛṣṇa. While Kṛṣṇa certainly contributed to the blossoming of this amorous sentiment and fully responded to Rādhā's love, he did not restrain himself from enjoying the company of the thousand milkmaids of Vrindavana. The Gīta Govinda tells of the vicissitudes of this tormented love, where Rādhā, despite feeling betrayed, cannot resist the flattering attentions of the playful Lord.

In some of the choreographies,<sup>66</sup> Rādhā shows her dissatisfaction in front of the indiscriminate behaviour of her lover, but her anger is not very convincing, and the acceptance of her own amorous sentiments is always controlled and partially concealed. While she wants to surrender to her own feelings and desires, she always reminds herself, her lover, and the *sakhī*, her milkmaid friend, of the social consequences that will derive from her lack of self-control. Kṛṣṇa is never too concerned about it. It is Rādhā that, being a married woman, insists on restraining her love, without being able to renounce it. Rādhā is often represented in dance as concerned about how her behaviour can be judged by society according to the dominant moral code. However, society is seldom portrayed *per se*. It is rather filtered through Rādhā's feelings and eyes. This is a sign that she is able to control herself and hence she has embodied the moral code. Therefore, the story between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is constructed upon a profound hesitancy between what a woman wants and what she does, in light of the dominant moral order. This hesitancy is created by a tension between the awareness of one's desire and the exercise of self-control.

As Shweder suggests, *lajyā* takes the form of physical withdrawal or retreat. In fact, one of the Odissi steps, which is mostly used in abhinaya pieces and which is called *chapaka*, consists of stepping on the supporting foot, while displacing the body in the opposite direction. I argue that, such a step, while apparently a merely technical device, performs a

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<sup>66</sup> In drawing my analysis, I have particularly in mind Rādhā's portrayal in the Odia abhinaya 'Patacharide'.

form of subtle hesitancy and a sense of retreat throughout the dance pieces, by making the displacement indirect. However, the subtlest way in which the experience of lajyā is embodied is through the basic technique itself, where dancers learn to move their legs, torso, eyes and neck in opposite directions.

A clear example of this aesthetic principle is given by the basic step, 'cauka 2', already described in the previous chapter. In this step the dancer, after stamping the right leg on the floor, moves the torso slowly to the left, while moving the neck and the eyes to the right, and pushing the arms away from the torso. This action creates a tension within the body of the dancer and especially between the different limbs, not only in terms of directions but also in terms of the kinetic and temporal quality of the movements. In fact, while the footwork consists of direct movements, produces discrete sounds, and must be executed with strength, the movements of the upper body are continuous, extended and require fluidity of movement. In addition, the movements of the feet are performed first, whereas the movements of the upper body are executed just after the footwork and conceived as its consequence. Therefore, the way the torso moves, as a consequence of the footwork and as depending on it, enacts a sort of physical retreat.

In short, through attitudes, gestures, movements and gazes, the performance of lajyā informs more or less explicitly the whole movement vocabulary of Odissi. Therefore, the experience of lajyā operates on different levels in the dance vocabulary, defining its aesthetics as well as its ethics. Lajyā is an aesthetic device that enacts women's moral self-control and therefore constructs an acceptable, domesticated portrayal of the feminine in dance. Lajyā, as self-controlled and self-regulated feminine power, must be understood in relation to norms about gender roles and relationships in Odia society.

As I said, dancers are very clear that there is no grace without control, and that although the guru can provide guidance on how to develop strength in the dancing body, it is

eventually the dancer who has to be able to exercise this self-control. Self-control is the embodiment of a relation of power between genders, where the feminine is restrained by the masculine, but this masculine is internalised, it has become part of the self. This strikingly recalls what Berger (1972) writes in *Ways of seeing*:

men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (47)

Similarly to what Berger says, the main female character represented in Odissi has embodied the male surveyor, through the performance of *lajyā*. The feminine, or more precisely the domesticated feminine, which is aesthetically and morally appropriated, is defined by grace, as a product of the exercise of self-control, indirectness, dependency, and hesitancy. In this performance of gender, *lāsya* and *lajyā* are often conflated and both considered synonyms of grace.

The embodied politics of self-control allows women to manage not only their desires but also their disappointments. Therefore, as *lajyā* is self-control over ‘positive’ impulses, such as desires, *abhimāna* is self-control over ‘negative’ impulses, such as anger or discontent. Dance practitioners normally translate the word *abhimāna* in English through the expression ‘pretending to be angry’. Sonali Mishra explained it as follows:

It is pretending to be angry when you are not... it is like sweet, like if your husband doesn’t call you, you are not mad, but you are mad.

Other adjectives used to explain this word are ‘sulky’ and ‘proud’. Priyambada Pattnaik often used these terms to help her student embody the ‘right’ attitude even when performing strictly technical movements. According to this attitude, a woman pretends to

be angry, which means that she has been able to control her anger while at the same time performing it for social purposes.

Normally the abhimāna attitude is used in dance to describe the feeling of deception that a woman has experienced because of a man's behaviour. This is especially the state in which we often encounter the character of Rādhā. Rādhā is betrayed by Kṛṣṇa and she openly complains against her lover's behaviour. She often pretends to decline Kṛṣṇa's attentions, but she does so only as a form of social protest without really wanting, expecting or believing that her dissatisfaction will change the situation. She shows her disdain towards something that she considers unacceptable, while she does not allow herself to truly nurture a feeling of revenge or uncontrollable anger. This is similar to what Menon and Shweder (1998) write in this regard:

Neither complaint nor dragging one's feet can be credibly viewed as 'subversion' or 'resistance'. In the Old Town they are just the ways in which confident women express their dissatisfaction or displeasure with what is happening within the family, without indicating any desire for radical change. (102)

Therefore, Rādhā's character is often portrayed in an abhimāna attitude.

Another way in which abhimāna is portrayed in Odissi is through peculiar movements of the chin, or through other gestures that visualise and symbolise some form of physical rejection. For example, Rādhā may use her hand to stop an imaginary Kṛṣṇa from coming too close to her. This physical rejection can also be internalised. For instance, the dancer may embody the two lovers at once and use one hand, symbolising Rādhā's body, to push away the other, symbolising Kṛṣṇa's body. However, this act of rejection is never abrupt, and in fact, not really convincing. Rādhā is simultaneously reluctant to have Kṛṣṇa either too close or too far from her. She is aware of both her wishes and of her disappointment



without letting any of them completely go, while partially displaying both of them. As a refined woman, Rādhā is the embodiment of morally and aesthetically valued self-control.

As I said, abhimāna and lajyā are attitudes considered specifically feminine and are often described by my informants as ‘typical’ of Odia women’s behaviour. Hence, the concepts of lajyā and abhimāna regulate gender relationships in Odia society, as they regulate Odissi aesthetics. Gurus often employ these two concepts, when they are teaching certain particular movements of the dance vocabulary and certain characters of the abhinaya repertoire. Abhimāna and lajyā are the main attributes of the predominant character depicted both in pure and in pantomimic dance. In particular, they characterise the character of Rādhā. Therefore, I suggest that Rādhā is the perfect embodiment of grace, as determined by the attitudes of both abhimāna and lajyā.

While the choreographic vocabulary of Odissi includes numerous dances in which the female goddess appears both in her domesticated (Pārvatī, Saraswatī, Gaurī) and in her undomesticated forms (Durgā and Kālī), Rādhā is certainly the favourite and most developed female character of guru Kelucharan’s repertoire. It is not by chance either that guru Kelucharn ‘was’ the best Rādhā, as dancers often put it, and that no female dancer has ever been able to equal his interpretation and embodiment of Kṛṣṇa’s favourite lady. It must be noticed that Rādhā, although worshipped as a goddess in Hinduism, is more a sort of ‘refined’ human being (Kinsley, 1986). She is the epitome of devotion and of the human being’s longing for union with the supreme God. When dancers talk about Rādhā, they stress that she is different from the other *gopīs* (the milkmaids of Vrindavana), and especially that she is not a vulgar woman. In fact, she is well-mannered and, in spite of Kṛṣṇa’s misdeeds, she is able to control her anger. As I have discussed above, Rādhā is also extremely hesitant to express her desires. Her love and attraction for Kṛṣṇa are too strong,

and yet she embodies her society's moral code, and shows shame, modesty, coyness and self-restraint.

Rādhā is the incarnation of morality and aesthetic grace.<sup>67</sup> In fact, I suggest that Rādhā is the epitome of what Chatterjee (1993) has defined as the 'new' Indian woman. Chatterjee has argued that, in colonial and post-colonial discourses about the Indian nation, women have played, and still play, a crucial role in symbolising India's true nature, as opposed to the West. According to him, in the nationalist agenda, women were associated with spirituality and tradition, as opposed to western materialism and modernity. However, these women of the nation, or 'new' women, as Chatterjee calls them, are of a very specific kind, defined not only in opposition to western shameless and promiscuous women, but also in opposition to the rural unrefined women of the country's villages.

The "new" woman was quite the reverse of the "common" woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. (127)

When dancers talk about Rādhā, they often specify that she is a refined woman. In fact, she is the most refined among all the gopīs who, despite being rural characters, are always represented by Kelucharan Mohapatra as 'delicate', 'elegant' and 'well-mannered' beings. Perhaps the main difference between Rādhā and the other milkmaids is that Rādhā's voice stands out. Rādhā reclaims Kṛṣṇa for herself. She desires, she complains, she refuses to meet her betraying lover.

However, in one of the most controversial items of guru Kelucharan's repertoire, which is an abhinaya based on a song of the Gīta Govinda that contains similar ambiguities, Rādhā is represented after having spent the night with her lover. She even asks Kṛṣṇa's help to fix her hair, dishevelled during the amorous play, fasten her dress and apply cooling sandal

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<sup>67</sup> For an examination of Rādhā as a Hindu goddess, see Kinsley (1986).

paste on her face. Dancers say that this choreography, which is much debated, together with the corresponding song of the *Gīta Govinda*, represents Rādhā's dream of union with Kṛṣṇa, rather than the real erotic union. Whether, according to the choreographer, the union took really place or not, it is clear that guru Kelucharan's Rādhā is here represented as a bold woman who knows what she wants, even if she may fulfil her desires only in her dreams. Guru Kelucharan did not choreograph the social consequences of Rādhā's arguable loss of self-control either. He intelligently left the future generations to interpret the heroine's behaviour.

In short, in this section, I have examined how grace is conceived, experienced and defined in Odissi, as the essential feature of the dance's aesthetic code. I have suggested that ideas about grace depend upon specific ways of conceiving the feminine, as the product of the exercise of self-control over one's desires and dissatisfactions. I have used local categories, in particular those of *lajyā* and *abhimāna*, to explain how the graceful and the feminine are constructed and embodied in Odissi dance vocabulary. However, I have also suggested that these categories, while being local, must be understood within a specific historical context, which is that of colonial and post-colonial discourses about women, sexuality and respectability.

In the following section, I further explore the experience of subordination of the feminine to the masculine, as it is embodied through the dance vocabulary. I conclude the chapter by arguing that, although women are portrayed in this dance vocabulary as depending on men and subordinated to them, the practice of Odissi provides real women with a sense of relative empowerment and acquisition of agency, which are experienced by dancers in positive terms.

## 6. EMBODYING DEPENDENCY

Although, as noted above, clichéd discourses put emphasis on the grace of Odissi and identify it with the feminine character of the form, dancers argue that power, strength and stamina are equally necessary in order to embody the correct aesthetics of the dance. A dancer who is able to embody and perform only the *lāsya* aspects of the Odissi dance vocabulary, is as little appealing as a dancer who does not have grace at all. Therefore, despite the emphasis on the *lāsya* character of the dance, it is clear that the *tāṇḍava* elements are equally essential to the rendition of the dance's aesthetic code.

I have also pointed out above that the *tāṇḍava* quality is normally associated with the lower body, especially with a correct 'sitting position' in *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* and with a clear and precise rhythmic footwork, whereas the *lāsya* quality is normally associated with the movements of the upper body, in particular with the suppleness of the torso. In fact, as I will explain in more detail in the following chapter, dancers experience their body as made of two halves, which are clearly distinguished and yet always related to one another, so to form a unit of movement. Explaining the co-presence of these two different qualities in the dancing body, Ileana Citaristi said:

Guruji [Kelucharan Mohapatra] emphasised so much the torso and the flow of the upper portion of the body, but the body from the waist down has to be very grounded, and the strength and the energy of the feet also very prominent. So whatever we do with the lower portion is very solid and very grounded, and then we have this fluent movement of the torso, which gives the gracefulness to the style. And that can be the *lāsya* and the *tāṇḍava*. [...]. There is always a balance between these two movements. If you go in the macro, you can say that it is in the upper and lower portion, but if you go in the micro-analysis, you find that each movement has both these aspects. And I suppose the aesthetic appeal of a dance finally comes from the balance, which the dancer is able to draw between *lāsya* and *tāṇḍava*.

Ileana suggests that the aesthetics of Odissi is grounded on the co-presence of *lāsya* and *tāṇḍava* qualities in each dance movement, and especially on the balance between these two elements, although, as demonstrated above, the way in which this balance is achieved depends upon the subject engaged in the practice.

Ileana's claim echoes what Menon and Shweder (1998) write about gender roles and relationships in Odia society:

Among Oriya Hindus in the temple town of Bhubaneswar, men and women recognise each other as social actors, equal in importance and effectiveness, who complement each other's activities. To cast men as oppressors and women as victims is to try to establish a false dichotomy, one that does not exist within Oriya point of view. (103)

It is however difficult to deny that the *lāsya* elements, and in general all those aspects in dance which are defined as pertaining to the domain of the feminine are always constructed as depending on and subordinated to the *tāṇḍava*, masculine elements. This takes place at different levels. A first level is provided by the movement vocabulary itself.

Dancers repeat quite consistently in their interviews that they perceive two distinct forces and qualities in their bodies: control, power, strength, steadiness, rootedness in their lower body and fluidity, resilience and suppleness in their upper body. Hence, dancers clearly associate the upper body with *lāsya* and thus with the feminine energy and the lower body with *tāṇḍava* and thus with the masculine energy. While they experience these two halves of the body as clearly distinguished in terms of energies used, they do not conceive them as independent from each other. In particular, there is a relationship of dependency of the upper on the lower body. In fact, during the basic training, dancers learn to move their torso, together with the upper limbs, only after executing the movements of the legs. The movements of the upper body are performed and experienced as a consequence of the movements of the legs. Therefore, they learn to experience the feminine and masculine as

interdependent with the former being subordinate to the latter, despite practices and discourses emphasising the feminine aspects of the dance vocabulary.<sup>68</sup>

The dependency of the feminine on the masculine is articulated also in relation to the musical aspects of the dance. Dancers clearly associate the circular and continuous movements of the upper body with the *rāga*, and the footwork with the *tāla*. They normally consider the *rāga* as the feminine element of the music, and the *tāla* as the masculine element. According to dancers, the movements of the legs, which are engaged in creating rhythmic patterns, provide the kinetic and temporal structure for the circular and lyrical movements of the upper body. Therefore, although the movements of the upper body are for the most part continuous and rounded, their continuous flow is in fact strictly regulated by the temporal and kinetic organisation provided by the rhythmic footwork, or the masculine element of the music.

The idea of the dependency of the feminine on the masculine is articulated also in terms of movement details. Odissi dancers say that, in order to be a good dancer, one has to acquire all those movement details that are not necessarily taught and codified in the dance technique. Dancers associate technique with the basic *cauka* and *tribhaṅga* steps and in general with strength, stamina and clarity of movements, while they relate the movement 'details' or 'nuances' with the gracefulness that characterises the dance vocabulary. Dancers argue that one has to learn first the basic technique, that provides the structure for the movements, and then focus on adding details and nuances. Therefore, the graceful aspects of the dance are considered subsequent to and depending on the acquisition of strength, power and clarity of movement.

Discourses on the dependency and subordination of whatever is associated to and considered to be feminine are reproduced on the social and artistic level as well. Dancers

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<sup>68</sup> On the experience of the body as divided in an upper feminine part and a lower masculine part, see also Layer III.

are believed to depend on musicians and in general on men for learning, performing, teaching and choreographing. In this respect, it is easy to notice that while dancers are still predominantly women, musicians continue to be predominantly men. This is particularly true for the drum player, who is the one who provides the temporal and kinetic structure of the dance and therefore control the musical as well as the choreographic performance.

Exploring the relationship between students and guru, Curda (2002) has noted that while women are the main exponents of this performing art, gurus continue to be predominantly men. Curda claims that women are hardly allowed to teach, and if they do so, they will carry out their profession near their household and without accepting a systematic payment for their service. However, this scenario is changing nowadays, as there are several women who are established choreographers and teachers. Certainly, women teachers acquire the appellation of guru much later than men. On the contrary, male dancers will be asked by the guru to teach at an earlier stage of their training and regardless of their skills and they will take on the appellation of guru at a much earlier stage. Curda also notices that, being a dance student or performer is quite a costly activity, which is accessible only to middle and upper class women. Hence, Curda suggests that performing becomes for women more an issue of social status than of professional career. Therefore, Curda concludes: 'dance career does not really enhance women's economic or social power. The guru is normally the one who has the power' (7).

These issues of power work also at the aesthetic level. For example, performing with live musicians is a sign of artistic maturity for a dancer, and it reflects, as Curda suggests, a certain economical power. However, dancers often have to pay the musicians out of their own fee, being left with little or nothing. Therefore, performance does not necessarily empower women at the economical level, and makes them dependent on the requests of the accompanying musicians. In addition, whether dancing to recorded or live music,

dancers are trained to believe that they have to adjust to the music given by the musician. They finally learn to believe that they cannot choreograph unless the musicians provide them with a music composition. Being informally denied music training as an essential part of their dance training, dancers are considered incapable of initiating and controlling the creative and performative process.<sup>69</sup>

In short, while discourses put emphasis on the feminine aspects of the dance, practices put emphasis on the masculine ones, arguing that these masculine elements are necessary for a correct rendition of the dance aesthetics. In general, both practices and discourses construct the feminine and the masculine as both necessary and interdependent, although the feminine is more dependent on the masculine than the reverse, and certainly subordinate to it. However, many dancers experience the embodiment and the practice of this dance vocabulary as an acquisition of power and agency. In the last section of this chapter, I examine what kind of empowerment Odissi practitioners gain from the embodiment of this dance vocabulary and hence of its underlining logic that wants whatever belongs to the domain of the feminine to be dependent on and subordinate to the domain of the masculine.

## 7. EXPERIENCES OF EMPOWERMENT

Although dancers do not use terms such empowerment or agency, they certainly ascribe several positive meanings to their involvement in the dance practice and to their embodiment of the dance vocabulary. I use the term ‘empowerment’ to describe the

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<sup>69</sup> While things are slightly changing nowadays, as it is becoming easier to find female dance teachers and choreographers both in New Delhi and in Odisha, during my fieldwork, I have particularly become aware of the subtle sense of subordination dancers feel towards musicians, a subordination which is often disguised behind aesthetic discourses.



positive effects that the dance practice has for Odissi practitioners, and the term 'agency' to indicate the sense of relative control over one's body, mind and self, that dancers experience as a consequence of their involvement in the practice of Odissi. I argue that this empowerment is experienced at the social and psychophysical level. In these final pages, I look at what dancers identify as the reasons that make them feel in control over themselves and socially, physically and psychologically empowered, despite embodying a logic of dependency, subordination and control over one's own desires and dissatisfactions. For several women involved in the practice of Odissi, the dance vocabulary provides an aesthetically and morally acceptable way to express their femininity and sensuality. For example, Moushumi Joshi said:

As I became more mature, I came to my middle 20s, maybe it was a coincidence but I started to see more Odissi performances particularly from Nrityagram. I think I was just caught by the way they dance and the fact that, for the first time, I saw women dancing that look like women. The sensuality that comes through dance, the sensuality for women, for me that was very important. [...] Odissi as a dance, I felt it is about flirtation. It is like there is somebody, and you want to get their attention, but you do not say it directly. So, there are a lot of those undertones of sensuality. And, yet, it is a classical dance form.

For Moushumi the choice of learning Odissi coincides with the awareness of having become an adult woman. Odissi provides her with a form to develop her gender identity. In particular, Moushumi is attracted by the sensuality that this dance displays and by the fact that, in Odissi, women dance 'like women'. Therefore, Moushumi finds in Odissi the 'true' representation of her gender. In addition, Odissi is a classical dance. In fact, to refer to the classicism of the form is, for dancers, a way to confirm that this is legitimated by society at large and hence morally acceptable.

To emphasise the connection between Odissi aesthetics, the coming of age and the corresponding acquisition of a gendered identity, Moushumi added:

It's actually a dance form for adults. I don't think children would be able to appreciate Odissi until they become mature and feel the adult woman in them. Until you become a woman inside.

According to Moushumi, Odissi aesthetics can be fully embodied only by adult women.

Along similar lines, Priyambada Pattnaik claimed:

even one who is not learning Odissi and they watch a performance, and they come out and say 'what beautiful, what graceful movements, I would like to learn this Odissi'. Even if they are in the age of forty or forty-five, then they start learning the dance form. So, it means that something is there that attracts women.

For many adult women, Odissi provides a safe space to acquire, experience and express their sensuality and their gender identity, in a way that is morally acceptable and socially legitimated. Thus, Odissi allows women a relative emancipation within the moral boundaries placed by the society they live in.

For some dancers, the empowerment is achieved at a more psychophysical level. For instance, speaking about the embodiment of the qualities of the movement vocabulary and of its basic geometrical forms, Carolina explained that dance:

has given me more self-confidence, more stability in that sense. If I can stand in cauka, it means that I can also think of myself as a pillar, like a person who has stability or a person who is able to do different things. And like a tribhaṅga that is more feminine, sensual, beautiful, and if I am able to flow... and of course all these properties they just come into your way of portraying yourself as a person.

Therefore, Carolina associates cauka with the acquisition of confidence and assertiveness, with the power to do something, to make choices, to be 'grounded', centred and strong. In contrast, she associates the tribhaṅga with a sense of flow, relaxation, sensuality, beauty and flexibility. Carolina attributes positive meanings to the embodiment of the dance's basic stances and of the qualities that these bear. The characteristics of the movement vocabulary become part of her personality and sense of self, implying a form of empowerment and positive growth at both the physical and the psychological levels. Although in a different way than Moushumi, Carolina too finds in the embodiment of this dance form a positive portrayal of the self, which includes and combines different elements.

Amanda Geroy experiences a form of empowerment in embodying the energy of the characters portrayed in the choreographic vocabulary. Through this experience, she is able to get 'closer to the divine'. In fact for many dancers, the practice of the dance is empowering on an existential level, as it is a way in which one can pursue self-refinement and self-cultivation and, through this, achieve an extraordinary experience of the self. Even the rhetoric of self-control, which could be thought as limiting the śakti or female power of an individual, is experienced as a form of empowerment. In this respect, Amanda said:

Sujata is 'totally controlled' but you never see that she is controlling. I mean it never looks tightly controlled. This idea of control but with fluidity, like... it reminds me of Hanuman, he is the epitome of strength, but where does this strength come from? It is not an 'I' kind of strength. It is the strength of the surrender. His surrendering is what makes him the most powerful. It is actually the strength of Rāma that Hanuman<sup>70</sup> has.

Therefore, dancers feel empowered by bringing the 'masculine' sense of power and control within their bodies, and by 'surrendering' to it. In general dancers feel psychophysically

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<sup>70</sup> Rāma is considered another form of Lord Viṣṇu. Hanuman, another Hindu mythological character represented in the form of a monkey, helped Rāma in defeating demons and enemies.

empowered by the acquisition of strength, which is so intrinsic to the movement vocabulary of Odissi, and by the acquisition of those feminine attitudes that are considered acceptable by society at large. When I asked Anandita Banerjee, the youngest among my informants, what changes she had experienced since she had been learning dance, she answered 'Happy, powerful, I am gaining strength everyday. Inner strength. I feel strong and confident'. And Deeksha Sharma:

Dance is something that can really transform me from a bad mood to a very overwhelming mood. There are so many tensions in my life, but dance just transforms me into another person. And I am not very expressive, even with very close friends of mine. I expect people to understand me rather than me making an effort to understand them. But with dancing I have learned expression, all those facial expressions, hand gestures, all those movements which are so feminine and that are now part of my life. Now I feel more relaxed and I express myself better than before.

Like for Moushumi, for Deeksha as well, dance provides the means to express parts of herself, and especially of her femininity, which she would not or could not express otherwise.

Dancers also feel empowered in their ability to resist and overcome pain as well as mental idleness, and develop endurance to physical effort. Dancers argue that, without mental strength, it is difficult to do regular practice. To be able to improve physical skills and develop discipline for practice is experienced by many dancers as a form of taking control over their bodies and mind. Sujata Mohapatra said 'when my physique doesn't allow me to go ahead, I am strong mentally. So my mental strength pushes me so much'. Hence, mental strength is often associated with discipline and endurance to pain.

For many women, dance practice is a form of developing self-agency, which is interpreted as a form of control and decision-making power over their own life. In fact, Priyambada

Pattnaik, by having lost, after marriage, the freedom to practise on a regular basis, felt disempowered. Deeksha anticipated this possibility as well by saying:

I do not know if I will be able to continue once I will get married, because in India, my in-laws, you know, I don't know who I will get married with, but once I get married... I can't decide whether they will allow me to do that or not, but at least this time of my life when I am earning and I do not have other responsibilities related to family. [...] I know that, somewhere down the line, I may have to leave it, maybe not, if destiny is with me, but yes in the time that I am learning, I want to just learn every possible thing which is there.

In these words, the complicated intersection of economic independence, social rules, personal desires and life expectations reveals that issues of empowerment are never simple, but always the result of partial and temporary compromises.

Despite wishing to learn dance for many years, Deeksha had been able to do so only after having acquired a permanent job as a school teacher, while still being single, and therefore free from family obligations. She had been able not only to convince her family to allow her to get dance tuition, but she had finally been able to share her passion with them. In fact, she explained:

Initially my mother said 'you can't practise at home'. But now she wants me to practise at home. So she has assigned me a place [in the house] 'this is your place, whenever you want you can practise for any duration'. So she asks me 'ok, show me what you have learnt'. And even my father. Now, it has become part of their life also. [...] They motivate me, sometimes I am not physically well. She even motivates me 'come on Deeksha, it is Odissi dance, go to your class'. I never thought that something like this would happen.

As the words of these dancers show, the practice of dance as well as the embodiment of the movement vocabulary and of the meanings and values embedded into it are experienced in positive terms. In this sense, I suggest dance experience is empowering

because it entails some form of agency and control over one's own life, body, mind and sense of self. Although this empowerment is limited by the moral code in force in the society they live in, it cannot be belittled and considered superficial, as it is perceived in clearly positive terms by the protagonists.

In short, the explanations that dancers give in relation to this empowerment could be summarised as follows: firstly, dance provides them with an aesthetically and morally acceptable way to channel their female power, their sense of self as women, their femininity and sensuality; secondly, it allows them to develop physical and psychological strength to withstand pain and distress, and to acquire agency, that is the capacity to make decisions, partially control one's own life, even within quite a regulated set of rules; thirdly, it allows them to transcend the limitations of the individual self and to embody a multiplicity of states of mind and body.<sup>71</sup>

This brings me to conclusions that are similar to those advanced by Menon (2000, 2013b) in her critique of a universally valid feminism. In fact, having investigated the experience of well-being and life satisfaction among Hindu-Brahmin-Odia women of the Old Temple Town of Bhubaneswar, Menon argues that these women conceive and are able to derive both satisfaction and dissatisfaction within their cultural horizon of sense, without being either passive victims of the social system or rebels, ready to transgress the codes that rule their life and that of the group within which they live. Menon therefore uses the specific case of the Odia women's sense of wellbeing, defined according to culturally specific categories and values, to argue that feminism is not, nor can it be universal (Menon, 2000). Similarly, issues of power, satisfaction and dissatisfaction must be interpreted within the cultural context in which they take place and from the point of view of the subjects, investigating the multiple meanings and the values they attribute to them.

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<sup>71</sup> See also Chakravorty (2008) on the sense of agency and empowerment that dancers gain from their involvement in the practice of dance.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed how dancers interpret the rhetoric of self-transcendence in relation to their socio-cultural identities. I have suggested that an examination of this rhetoric reveals how issues about ethnicity, nationality and gender are embedded into the dance practice, discourses, movement and choreographic vocabulary. I have argued that this rhetoric is articulated differently depending on the subjects involved in the practice. In fact, while dancers claim that one has to be able to transcend one's identity, it is clear that through the dance practice one is also expected to embody a very specific, multi-layered bodiliness, through meanings and values that are recognised as distinctive of Odia society. These values and meanings mainly concern how gender roles and relationships are ideally conceived in the local society. But I have also proposed that these ideals are the result of a complex mixture between local categories and values that derive from colonial and post-colonial discourses about femininity and womanhood. Finally I have suggested that despite embodying the rhetoric of dependency and subordination of the feminine to the masculine, and presumably of women to men, dancers generally experience the practice and embodiment of dance in positive terms. These positive terms are derived by the meanings and values attributed to the practice and which are culturally specific. In short, dance provides a field for articulating women's power and agency, albeit within a legitimate, limited and controlled patriarchal environment.





## LAYER III: *BODIES*

### OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter, I consider how Odissi dancers experience their body in the practice of dance. I contend that, through training, the ordinary body of the practitioner undergoes a process of aesthetic refinement gradually ‘becoming’ the extraordinary body of the performer. In the following pages, I examine the terms dancers use to articulate the process of aesthetic refinement that the training entails, the embodied experiences associated with it and the discourses that illustrate its accomplishment.

In particular, I discuss dancers’ claim that training is a ‘scientific’ process and implies a scientific approach to the moving body. I suggest that, in this process, the individual body is shaped as a ‘dividual’ body, to use Marriott’s (1989) term, in that it becomes a locus of complex relationships and exchanges, which take place both within and through the bodily boundaries and are regulated by cultural values and meanings. More specifically, the body is made ‘partible’ within the bodily boundaries and ‘permeable’ through them, in order to become the dancing body of the performer, whose ideal image clearly emerges in dancers’ narratives.

## 1. INDIVIDUAL BODIES

When speaking about the body, Odissi dancers normally mean someone's physique, with its distinctive and unique features. In their narratives, dancers clearly distinguish the body from the mind. Like the body, the mind too is endowed with individual characteristics. In fact, in describing a dancer, Odissi practitioners would normally refer not only to her physical features, but also to her personality, energy, attitude and capacities, elements that are deemed to pertain to one's mind. Sujata Mohapatra articulated the distinction between these two components of the individual subject by saying that 'everyone has individual differences, maybe physically, maybe mentally, maybe traditionally', by this meaning that each dancer is endowed with a distinctive body and a distinctive mind, which are then both filtered by one's cultural belonging.

Despite distinguishing them, dancers experience body and mind as being related and as continuously affecting each other. While the training focuses on the physical body of the practitioner, dancers are aware and clearly contend that one's mental capacities play a crucial role in the process of aesthetic refinement that training entails. In fact, the success of the learning process and of performance itself is for dancers determined more by the characteristics of one's mind than by those of one's body.<sup>72</sup> Unlike other forms of dance, such as western ballet, in Odissi the 'initial' body of the practitioner does not dictate inclusion or exclusion from the practice, nor does it determine success or failure in the

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<sup>72</sup> See the following chapter, Layer II, on the experience of body-mind relationships in the practice of dance.

process of aesthetic refinement that the training entails.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the basic dance training is especially intended to ‘make’ or ‘shape’<sup>74</sup> the dancing body, as practitioners often put it.<sup>75</sup>

Although dancers have a strong awareness of each individual’s body as unique and distinct from any other individual’s body, they also argue that training and systematic practice gradually ‘transform’ and ‘mould’ this individual body, ‘re-shaping’ and ‘re-making’ it as the ideal body of the performer, in accordance with the aesthetic values of the form. In this respect, Kumkum Lal provided a picture of the physical differences among individuals, while also arguing for the plasticity of the body enabled by the practice.

Each dancer body’s comes out in a different way [...]. Both the brain and the body are given from God, so you can’t help it. Some people have beautiful expressions. Just in their eyes, it comes out what emotion is there. And some people are endowed with heavy bodies or, for instance, with *cauka*. Some people’s knees automatically come out. Some people’s bodies and knees are made in a narrow way, and you should keep trying opening it up, but it doesn’t happen so easily. One has to keep trying to do that, and you will be surprised how much you can train the body. If you keep training, how much resilience... not resilience... plasticity is allowed, just like in yoga. [...] So many things over a certain period of time, if you make an effort... and your teacher has to guide you on how to reach that stage.

Hence, according to Kumkum, although the body has individual features that are more or less ‘appropriate’ to the aesthetics of Odissi, the effort of the student, combined with the appropriate guidance of the guru, allows one to reach stages, which could not have been

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<sup>73</sup> However, this does not mean that discourses on the particular features of one’s body are absent. In fact, dancers admit that there are certain bodily characteristics that can be more or less favourable to the embodiment of Odissi technique and aesthetics. As discussed in the previous chapter, these discourses are at stake in dancers’ daily experiences and are often used to articulate issues of nationality, gender and ethnicity.

<sup>74</sup> The following terms are put in inverted commas as used by the practitioners as metaphors of somatic experience in the learning process: ‘initial’, ‘make’, ‘shape’, ‘transform’, ‘mould’, ‘re-shaping’ and ‘re-making’.

<sup>75</sup> To be more precise, Odissi practitioners often claim that the success one can achieve in training depends from God or one’s natural talent, one’s dedication and hard work, and the correct guidance of the guru.

envisaged at the beginning of the training. Similar narratives on the dancing body reveal that dancers experience a gap between the 'real' body of the practitioner and the 'ideal' body of the performer and that the training is conceived as a process through which, with regular practice and the correct guidance of the guru, this individual real body is gradually 'formed' as the ideal dancing body of the performer.

The process of refinement that the training entails is meant to transform the 'individual' real body of the practitioner in the 'dividual' ideal body of the performer. I borrow the category of the 'dividual' from Marriott (1989) who has used it to explain personhood in Hindu traditions, in contrast to western views. According to Marriott, the Hindu person is not a bounded individual, clearly separated from others and from the environment. In particular, Marriott has argued that 'unlike the Western conception of the person as indivisible, integrated, self-developing unit, not normally subject to disjunction or reconstruction', in the Hindu worldview 'persons are composite and divisible (what one may better call 'dividuals')' (1989: 17). According to Marriott, the person in Hindu tradition is the locus of a complex net of relationships, which take place both within and through the body and which 'substantially' affect the constitution of the self. In this respect, in fact, he writes 'Hindu thinking about social transactions may seem peculiar for the biological substantialism on which it builds' (1976: 109). Marriott also adds that 'what goes on between actors are the same connected processes of mixing and separation that go on within actors' (1976: 109). In short, according to Marriott: (1) persons in Hindu traditions are composite and divisible entities; (2) social relationships and transactions 'substantially' affect the constitution of the person and therefore the body; and (3) there is a correspondence between the processes that take place within the subject and those that take place between subjects.

Despite being very influential in the field of South Asian studies, Marriott's ideas have also been criticised for drawing a dichotomous, if not simplistic, view of eastern and western conceptions of personhood and consequently of the body. For example, in her study of aging and gender in North India, Lamb (1997) has argued that her informants had a strong awareness of themselves as individuals, in contrast to Marriott's view of the dividual subject as almost devoid of subjectivity and agency. Similarly, writing about gender and personhood in Melanesia and South Asia, Busby (1997) has argued that the category of the 'dividual', proposed by Marriott, obscures important differences among South Asian cultures and traditions. Drawing on her own examination of personhood in the village of Marianad, in Kerala, and comparing it with Strathern's (1990) ethnographic research in Melanesia, Busby has proposed to further articulate the category of the dividual, distinguishing between 'partible' and 'permeable' personhood. In particular, she has argued that while in Melanesia a person is 'internally divided and partible', a 'microcosm of relations', in India, or at least in Kerala, a person is 'bounded but permeable', 'connected to others through flow of substances' (1997:275).

Drawing on these studies, I propose that the category of the dividual is useful as long as it is not considered specific to eastern in contrast to western societies, but it is used to understand how the sense of the individual self is culturally shaped as distinct and yet inseparable from other individual selves, and how interpersonal relationships affect and modify one's sense of self in a culturally relevant way. Therefore, in the following pages, I use the categories of the individual and the dividual to articulate the tension, that Odissi training entails, between the sense of self as distinct from other selves and the sense of self as a locus of relationships and exchanges that take place both within and through one's bodily boundaries and that substantially affect the sense of the individual self.

The focus on the dividual character of the body finds its apotheosis in the idea that to be a 'perfect' performer one has to be able to erase one's own sense of self, by forgetting both body and mind. Hence, the process of aesthetic refinement ideally culminates in the negation of the individual self, and in fact is identified with an experience of self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness. However, the fact that this state of complete and sustained 'self-forgetfulness' is experienced as extraordinary, rather than as ordinary, suggests that this rhetoric and, with this, the training itself is built on a tension between the sense of the individual and the sense of the dividual, of the inborn and the made, of the 'ordinary' and the 'extraordinary' and of the 'natural' and the 'aesthetic' body. In fact, although the training puts emphasis on the relational character of the dancing body, and therefore on its 'dividuality', to use Marriott's category, the sense of the individual, as a unique and distinct being, does not disappear. Instead it acts as a fundamental reference point in the aesthetics of the dance.

The individual character of one's body is particularly stressed by the relevance of the body's boundaries in dancers' somatic experience. These boundaries define one as an integral, distinctive, and bounded being. At the same time in order for the process of aesthetic refinement to take place these boundaries must be opened and passed through. Therefore, I argue, together with Lamb, that the emphasis put by certain cultural practices on the relational character of one's body does not necessarily exclude or erase the experience of one's self as a unique and distinct individual, but rather uses this experience as a reference point for elaborating culturally specific ideas about the self.

Drawing on Busby's categories, I also suggest that, through the process of refinement that the training facilitates, the body in Odissi dance is made at the same time partible and permeable. It is made partible within the body's boundaries, in that it is experienced as composed by parts that are distinguished one from the other and yet related to each other

according to clearly established aesthetic rules. At the same time, the body is made permeable through the bodily boundaries, in that it is expected to enter into a precise set of relationships with other bodies, both real and imaginary, by exchanging ‘substances’<sup>76</sup> with them and by creating socially and aesthetically relevant bonds. As I will examine in the following pages, dancers experience these substances in terms of energies or emotions.

Therefore, in order to develop my argument, I first take into account what the ideal dancing body entails for Odissi practitioners and what the process of aesthetic refinement implies. Then, I look at how Odissi dancers experience their bodily boundaries. Finally, I examine the discourses and practices that make the body partible, by applying what dancers call a ‘scientific’ approach to movement, and permeable, by entering in a complex set of interpersonal relationships that have both a moral and an aesthetic value.

## 2. FROM THE REAL TO THE IDEAL

Odissi practitioners normally speak about their own or others’ bodies by comparing them to an ideal image of the dancing body, which they construct during the dance practice and through the discourses embedded into it. This ideal image is a composite of metaphors, technical rules, aesthetic and moral values, visual references, as well as a wide array of verbal comments that the guru gives to the students during the learning process, or that dancers share among themselves in their daily practice. Although this ideal image is quite a broad concept and has shifting boundaries, for dancers it seems to be very clear and concrete. This is demonstrated by the detailed accounts practitioners often provided, during the interviews, when asked to describe the characteristics of the perfect Odissi dancer. Some of the verbal descriptions they gave are very rich, and yet it is plausible to

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<sup>76</sup> ‘Substances’, as used by Busby, is put in inverted commas to emphasise its metaphorical value.

think that the ideal image of the dancing body practitioners have includes other factors, which are less explicit and more difficult to articulate verbally.

For instance, Amanda Geroy explained the ideal dancing body in the following terms:

the body goes where it needs to go and reaches on time, and there is a real gelling between rhythm and dance, and music and dance.<sup>77</sup> Then, I think that sort of vibes of Odissi have to be there: it has to have a certain amount of coyness, a certain amount of playfulness. And the dancer has to be totally comfortable in the dance. The dancer should also have full control over all the instruments and she should be able to move each small part with control, so that everything is deliberated. Nothing is not deliberated. And there should be clarity of movement, especially in the mudrās, so that the execution of the mudrā is going perfectly with the song and with the beat, and the communication is very clear. And the mudrās should work with the eyes and expression, and the whole body language to express one idea, concept or character or beat of the dance. Everything should be gelled. [...] The perfect Odissi dancer should be fit, the body has to have aesthetic appeal. It doesn't have to be exactly like a Konark sculpture, but there should be beauty and fluidity to the body, and that thing should not be exaggerated too. And the dancer should also be filled with śakti, with energy, divine energy, so when the dance is over that divine vibration just resonates in the hall, in the audience.

According to Amanda, the perfect performer is the one who displays full control over the technical skills, by 'matching' the movement with the music and by executing the dance gestures with clarity and precision. But the perfect performer is also the one who is able to provoke some form of effect in the audience, an effect that Amanda defines in terms of 'divine energy'.

Sonali Mishra touched similar points in her description of the perfect dancer, by saying that:

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<sup>77</sup> Odissi dancers often use the term 'music' to refer exclusively to the rāga and to the singer's voice, indirectly excluding the drum player from this category.



For me the perfect dancer is someone technically perfect... so you should be able to see clarity of movement, the strength in the cauka, that the distance should be maintained,<sup>78</sup> that the level is being maintained as well.<sup>79</sup> Someone who can maintain that balance between soft and light, but at the same time someone who is very natural, because I think anyone can master the technique, but it is very difficult to be spontaneous.

Like Amanda, Sonali too describes the perfect performer in relation to the technical and performative skills. Thus, when thinking about the ideal performing body, dancers show being especially concerned with technique, that is to say with the movements' visual and aural clarity and precision, as well as with the interpretation of the performer, that is to say with what they describe as spontaneity or fluidity of movement, or as the vibes that the dancer is able to create among the audience when performing on stage.

Guru Ratikant Mohapatra mentioned slightly different points describing the ideal dancer from the perspective of a teacher.

I would tell the student that whatever you do, it must be very neat, clean and transparent. There is not shortcut, you have to work, you have to put all your dedication, concentration and achieve your destiny. Because it is a visual art, good thinking, good dancing, good training is required, so we have to go to all those sections, to understand the music, to understand the rhythm, everything, and staying inside the boundaries and limitations of tradition, one can do much innovation and wonderful new work.

In Ratikant's description, aesthetic values overlap with moral values. In fact, the 'transparency' of the movement is paralleled by the avoidance of 'shortcuts' during the learning process.

When asked to describe the perfect performer, some dancers also mentioned the physical appearance of one's body. For example, Kavita Dwibedi said:

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<sup>78</sup> She is referring to the distance between the feet in the cauka position.

<sup>79</sup> The level Sonali is referring to the degree to which the knees must be maintained bent during the whole execution of cauka and tribhaṅga movements.

For Odissi, I like to say that if you are very slim and tall it doesn't look that graceful. For Odissi you have to be a little bit feminine, a little fulfilling, for the torso, for the hips, you have to have a little feminine figure, only then the sculpture comes in. If you are flat, it is difficult, grace somewhere will miss.

Kumkum Lal suggested that if one has black hair, despite being a foreigner, her body will 'gel' better with the form, but she immediately added that 'if she dances very well, she raises over that'. In short, it is arguable that the ideal dancing body is a body that incarnates the aesthetics of the dance in its fullest form. In particular, it pertains to four main aspects of the dance practice: (1) the individual body of the practitioner, (2) the technical skills, (3) the performative skills and (4) the learning process.

For a student, the guru is normally the most complete embodiment of this ideal performing body. In fact, Carolina Prada said:

Initially the technique is, let's say, perfect. So from a perfect point, the people have to reach that perfect level. So suppose that one's teacher is able to embody that form in a complete way. Of course it requires lot of time, to get to that place, you have to have lots of time, because it is like an onion. For you to be able to understand the small small things, it takes layers and layers, layers and layers....

Therefore, the guru represents the living example of the gap between the individual and the ideal dancing body. But the guru is also important because he or she facilitates the gradual transformation of the student's body in the performer's body.

However, practitioners have apparently contrasting views on the way the gap between the real individual body and the ideal dancing body is overcome through training and the guidance of the guru. While for some of them it is the dancer's body that needs to 'adjust' to the technique, for others it is the dance technique that needs to be adjusted to the specificity of the practitioner's body. For example, Sujata Mohapatra explained her responsibility as a teacher in the learning process by rhetorically asking 'how can I make

one dancer pure, meant for this technique? You have to *make* the body, which is not ready, but you have to make it ready' (emphasis mine). For Sujata, the role of the teacher is that of literally 'shaping' the body of the practitioner, and of 'preparing' it for the embodiment of the dance vocabulary.

Carolina Prada described the same process in apparently opposite terms, by explaining:

Our guru told us that it depends from the length of your arms. The aesthetics is very much related to the style. Somehow it has to come back to the fact that it has to look like Odissi, that it has to contain the essence of Odissi and the parameters of the form.

According to Carolina and to her guru Priyambada Pattnaik, it is the dance technique that has to be slightly adjusted to the specific characteristics of the dancer's body, rather than the opposite. However, I suggest that these two seemingly contrasting views, articulated by Sujata Mohapatra and Carolina Prada, argue after all the same: that there is on the one hand the individual real and 'imperfect' body of the practitioner, and on the other the ideal 'perfect' body of the performer, normally incarnated by one's guru. The training consists in reducing the gap between the real and the ideal dancing body, by continually re-adjusting one's body as well as the dance technique, in order to maintain what dancers define as the 'essence of the form'. This essence of Odissi, the core of the ideal image of the dancing body, is a continuously shifting and fragile concept that is object of debate and concerns not only the dance technique, but also the music used to accompany the dance, the stories and characters depicted in the choreographies, the costume, the make up or the jewellery one is expected to use.

Describing this process of adjustment carried out mainly by the guru, Ileana Citaristi said:

Guruji<sup>80</sup> was instinctively dealing with each body differently, although he was teaching the same item to all of us, but you could feel that... because he was responding to our own rendition. So, each of us, in terms of symmetry, energy, in terms of space covering, and how

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<sup>80</sup> Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra.

much you sit, how much you elongate your arms. All this depends very much from the symmetry of your body, and of course your inner energy, if you feel masculine or feminine as a person.

Almost echoing Ileana's words, Sujata Mohapatra, speaking of the same guru, also argued:

Guruji has created Ardhanārīśvara<sup>81</sup> in her [Sanjukta's]<sup>82</sup> body. He also did it with us, by seeing the video, keeping the same format, because wherever he wanted to change... because my body and Sanjukta's body are very different. The approach of a dancer is also different. Then, in that case, being a creator, he always wanted the beauty in dance, so his main point was: maybe different body, but concept, energy and beauty should not be lost anywhere there. So thinking of that, he changed some of the accents, some of the movements.

Therefore, guru Kelucharan Mohapatra was continuously re-adjusting the technique and the choreographic vocabulary according to the specific physical and mental<sup>83</sup> features of his students.

In fact, dancers generally experience the training as a gauging process, during which the guru and the dancer search for a point of balance between the characteristics of the individual body and the aesthetic requirements of the style, or the ideal performing body. Carolina Prada explained the terms in which this gauging process is articulated during the training, by saying:

It takes so many layers of doing what is not [correct], of doing too much or doing too less, of not having the strength enough or of putting too much effort, of opening the legs too much or too less, of doing it from a 46 degree and not from a 45... this makes a huge difference.

In order to explain how the individual body attempts to fulfil the aesthetic requirements of the style, Carolina used the example of the position of the arms in *cauka*.

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<sup>81</sup> Ardhanārīśvara is an item of guru Kelucharn Mohapatra's classical repertoire.

<sup>82</sup> Sanjukta Panigrahi. See Layer V.

<sup>83</sup> I use 'mental' here to include one's attitude, personality, energy, which are in fact the 'mental body' or subtle body of the individual.

When I came to India, the first thing my guru corrected me was ‘your cauka is too much back’. What I remember I was always telling to myself was ‘ok, cauka is a square. So, what is a square? If this is my shoulder, then this has to be in a perfect straight line’. So, I was doing my cauka like this [*she demonstrates a slightly tilted back cauka*]. You can say that geometrically this is perfect. But then she told me ‘it looks a little bit too rigid and straight for your body, just push it a little bit forwards’. And then... ok it contains the same form, but it gives the style or it gives the possibility for the style, for that more relaxed look that you need in Odissi to come.

In short, dancers compare themselves and their individual dancing bodies to an ideal image of the performing body that they shape through practices and discourses and that they normally identify with the guru. This image is experienced as very clear in its ideal form, and yet in need of continuous adjustments in order to be embodied by individual ‘real’ dancers.

The guru does not only represent the embodiment of this ideal, but also and especially he or she is the one who is able to help the student embody the aesthetics of the style.

Therefore, there is an ideal image of the dancing body, that exemplifies how the body has to look and sound while dancing, and then there is a ‘know-how’ of the dance aesthetics, an embodied knowledge that the guru possesses and shares with her students through the training. Practitioners often describe this embodied knowledge in terms of ‘science’ behind the movement. I suggest that this ‘scientific’ knowledge of the dancing body pertains to one’s somatic experience within the bodily boundaries and defines the body of the practitioner in abstract terms enabling the process of gradual ‘self-erasure’ that the training is deemed to entail. In the following section, I examine dancers’ experience of the dancing body as a boundary that ‘scientifically’ separates the individual from the rest.

### 3. DRAWING THE BOUNDARIES IN BETWEEN

The practice of Odissi and therefore also dancers' embodied experience are informed by discourses about 'boundaries'. These boundaries concern both the dance aesthetics and the dancing body. They define what falls within and without the dance tradition, as well as within and without one's body. Although these boundaries are taken to clearly discriminate the inner from the outer, the appropriate from the inappropriate, the self from the other, they are also continuously subject to adjustments, and experienced as an interface through which energies pass and are shared. Thus, they are perceived as relatively shifting and permeable.

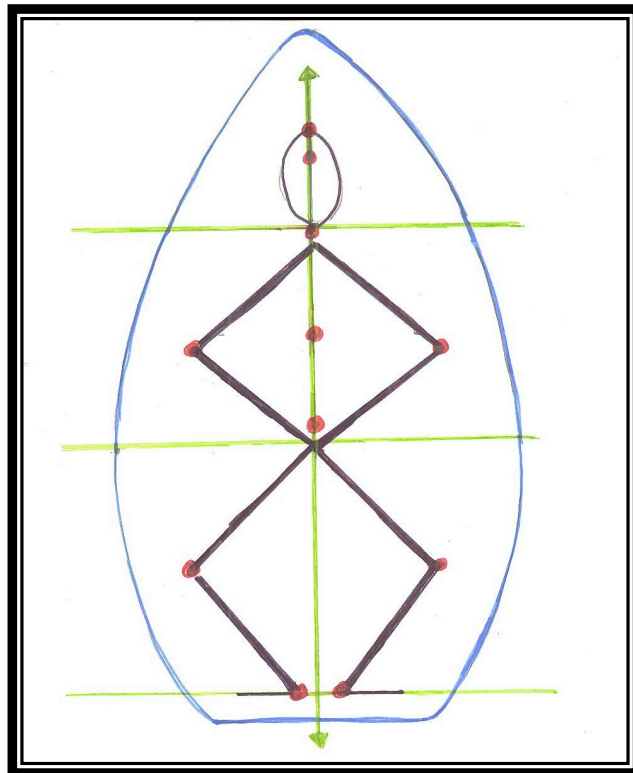
In this section, I focus on how dancers articulate their experience of bodily boundaries. I suggest that discourses about these boundaries articulate the tension between individuality and dividuality. By defining what is within and what is without one's body, these boundaries delimit the individual from the rest, while, by being the locus of interpersonal exchanges, these same boundaries put the individual in an ongoing relationship with the outer environment and with other subjects.

While dancers accept the epidermal surface of the body as the 'natural' limit that discriminates the inner from the outer, the boundaries that are experienced as truly important in the practice of dance are those created by the body moving in space. In other words, the boundaries of the dancing body are identified with one's kinesphere. However, according to dancers, this kinesphere is not 'naturally' possessed or acquired. Rather, it is methodically constructed through training, thus it specifically pertains to the movement vocabulary of Odissi. Priyambada Pattnaik explained this point by saying:

We have some technical things: our hands are supposed to be 'round way'. Your hands are never straight. [...] So, this has been practised so many times, in front of your teacher that it

has become part of your body. It does not go out of your control. The practice has made you hold it, within your limitations, so that is how you never go out of your order.

To go 'out of order' or 'out of control' is to go beyond the aesthetic kinesphere that Odissi training shapes. These words also reveal that the dancing body is experienced as moving within a restricted kinesphere, as the limbs are prevented from stretching out in space, by means of training and bodily control. Therefore in Odissi, the dancer always moves and, more precisely, learns to move within this restricted kinesphere that I suggest is roughly egg-shaped and that dancers experience as the outer boundary of their body.



**FIG. 13: EGG-SHAPED KINESPHERE**

Dancers often use the terms 'form', or 'frame', and 'content' to articulate their experience of the bodily boundaries and of what falls within them. It is arguable that the frame dancers mention corresponds to the restricted kinesphere of the dancing body. While the content within and passing through the bodily boundaries is often experienced in terms of energies

or liquid substances, the outer frames are experienced in terms of geometrical shapes. In fact, Carolina Prada explained:

The arms, they follow a very... not strong frame, but a frame that is very geometrical. [...] It has a very geometrical way of placing the arms, which makes it look not rigid, but like it has a form and a content.

Like Carolina, most Odissi practitioners often describe and experience the dance movement vocabulary as a succession and combination of squares, circles and triangles, of straight and circular lines, of movement trajectories and of clearly identified starting and ending points.

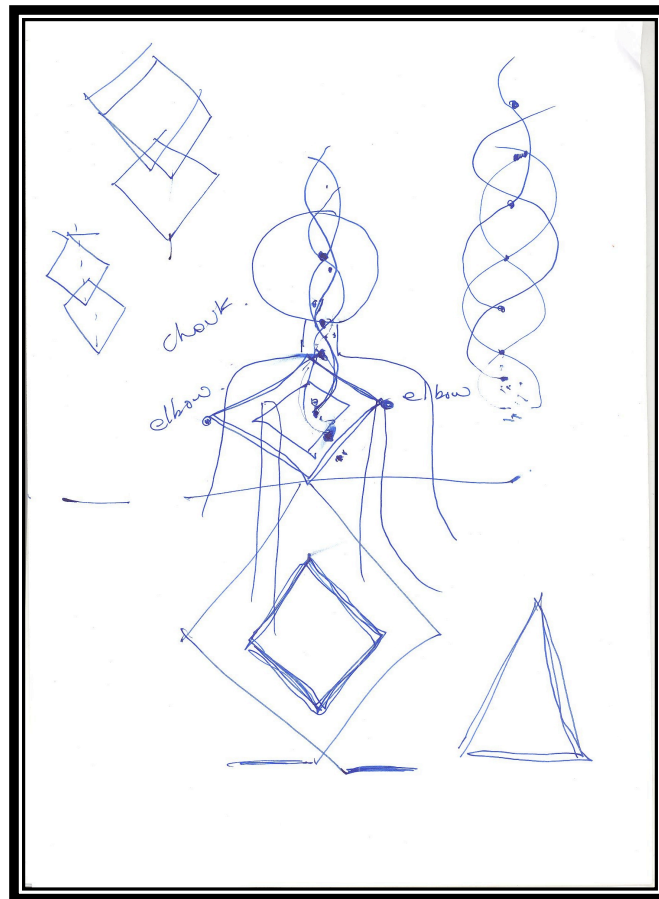


FIG. 14: EMBODIED GEOMETRIES (BY CAROLINA PRADA)

This experience of the bodily boundaries defining geometrical shapes is particularly strong when learning the dance technique and when using it in pure dance. In fact, in pure dance



the body is used and experienced as an abstract entity. As a geometrical enterprise, the body undergoes a process of abstraction and de-individualisation, becoming the object of minute calculations. From this perspective, the correctness of the dance technique is a matter of degrees, because as Carolina Prada suggested doing a movement 'from a 46 degree and not from a 45... this makes a huge difference!'

Joints and major limbs play an important role in the experience of the dancing body as an abstract entity assuming geometrical shapes. In particular, the positions of arms and legs and their relationship to the trunk delimit the dancing kinesphere and therefore the visual and experiential boundaries of one's body. In fact, as mentioned above, dancers often speak of their limbs in terms of the 'outer lines' of the movements. The ankles, knees, wrists, elbows, pelvis and shoulder joints are at the forefront of dancers' somatic experience.

In this embodied phenomenology, one's muscles and bones almost disappear from perception, or at least pass in the background of proprioception, in that they are rarely mentioned during practice. The correct execution of the movement is not perceived as depending on the correct use of muscles and bones, but on the correct embodiment and creation of geometrical shapes with one's body, through the minutely calculated use of limbs and joints. This calculation concerns feet, legs, arms and hands and establishes the distances between limbs and between these and the main trunk.

It is arguable that to speak about the movement vocabulary in terms of perfect geometries is to force the individual body to adjust to a logic of abstract concepts and calculations. This logic attempts to overlook and even erase from perception not only the idiosyncratic features of one's individual body, but also an important part of somatic experience, by reducing it to the perception of one's joints in relation to abstract geometrical shapes. I argue that the experience of the body and of the dance vocabulary in terms of geometrical

shapes, lines, points and trajectories of movement de-individualises the body, enabling the aesthetic process of refinement that the training is supposed to entail and that is accomplished in the experience of self-transcendence, self-forgetfulness or, as some dancers put it, even self-erasure in performance. I suggest that this rhetoric enables an act of power over the individual body by making it the object of an abstract process of calculation. It also corroborates the discourse about the scientific character of Odissi dance that practitioners often advance to legitimate and enhance the value of their artistic endeavour. In the next section, I specifically discuss this discourse about 'science' in the practice and embodied experience of the dance and I suggest that this scientific approach to the dancing body specifically pertains to somatic experience or the experience of the body within its kinetic boundaries, which I have described above.

## 4. THE 'SCIENCE' BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

When asked to speak about embodied experience in dance, practitioners often mention the terms 'science' or 'scientific'. In general, they use these terms in relation to dance technique and to the way the training process is carried out. For instance, guru Ratikant Mohapatra argued:

There is a science behind your movement, because it is a visual art. [...] You have to have your inner concentration to hold that line and the science behind the line.

Therefore, according to Ratikant Mohapatra, the science of Odissi is related to the fact that dance is a visual art, that is an art that the audience experience first and foremost visually. The 'line' Ratikant is referring to is the position in which the limbs, in this particular case the arms, have to be held. In fact, when speaking about the 'science' behind the movement, dancers often describe the body in terms of lines, parts and points, and in general in terms

of geometrical shapes, as discussed above. Ratikant's words also suggest that the way these lines are held, and therefore the way the body's movements are controlled from within, is based on some form of scientific knowledge. By this, my interviewee arguably means that there are precise and set rules that regulate the aesthetics of the dance and that the practitioner has to follow in order for her performance to be considered correct.

Along similar lines, Kavita Dwibedi argued that, as her training progressed, she gradually began to realise that Odissi was a very 'scientific' form of dance.

When I started reasoning myself, I realised that 'yes, Odissi is very much like mathematics. I have to think A+B is equal to so and so'. When I started reasoning, I said 'this is the distance [*she demonstrates the positions of the arms in relation to the torso*] that is working, this is the place where I have to keep it, this much space I have to leave. [...] That is the reason why I am putting more into perfection. Because Odissi is very sculpture-oriented and sculptures have been made in that framework.

Like Ratikant Mohapatra, Kavita too explained the science of dance, which she compared to mathematics, in relation to the visual character of the dance and in particular to its derivation from the sculptures of Hindu temples. Since the dancing body is a visual object, its geometries, its lines, points and angles, must be carefully calculated. Kavita's words also suggest that this 'scientific' approach to the dancing body allows one to reach technical perfection, which is often described by dancers as purity and clarity of lines. Therefore, the science of dance has to do mostly with dance technique.

Similarly, Ileana Citaristi explained the scientific approach that characterises the embodiment of Odissi, by saying:

Guruji<sup>84</sup> has a very scientific method... the rules of the style almost to perfection, so there is nothing, which he has left undone. There is always an explanation of why certain movements have to be done in that way.

Ileana associates guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's scientific method not only to the 'perfection' or accuracy of the technique, but also to the way the training process is carried out and to the meanings embedded in the dance vocabulary. This scientific approach to the moving body, to training and to the dance vocabulary ensures that anything, which is done in dance, is not the result of uncontrolled creativity, but of careful choices and attentive consideration.

By saying that everything has a meaning, one is arguably claiming that any gesture used in dance has a precise reason to be there and therefore must be reproduced by the performer as created by the choreographer with no alteration. This implies that for the individual performer there is ideally no choice of interpretation or freedom to change, but only the responsibility to understand the meanings and reproduce the movements that have been set by the choreographer. By saying that everything has a meaning, one also sets a relation of power between the teacher and the student, where the latter has to trust the former, as the one who 'knows' what is right and wrong.

Reproducing a similar rhetoric, Carolina Prada argued that, for her, technique was 'the mathematical tool of art'. By this she meant that technique provides the rules for the development of artistic practice. Deeksha Sharma used the term 'technicality' to refer to a similar concept. Sujata Mohapatra explained that guru Kelucharan's teaching was 'very thorough and precise, very clean, very detailed. Minutely you can observe and understand what technique exactly he wants in a body, and how the body should be totally ready for taking that technique'. By saying so, Sujata confirmed the meticulous approach to the

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<sup>84</sup> Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra.

dancing body and to teaching that Ileana had described as guru Mohapatra's 'scientific method'.

When during my fieldwork and training I attended guru Ratikant's classes, I was myself struck by the meticulous approach he would use to explain the basic movements of the dance vocabulary. When I asked him where this approach to movement came from, he explained that when his father, guru Kelucharan, had undergone heart surgery in 1990, he had asked the doctor to assist the surgery. Ratikant Mohapatra recalled talking about this surgery with his father, by saying:

Then my father and I went to a few doctors to know what is the science, I mean, what is the inside system of a human being, when we run, when we work, when we dance, what kind of system works inside and outwards. My father tried to search this science behind the body language and movements. [...] From there, after the 90s, I started analysing when a dancer dances what is the line, the weight shifting, the blood flow? How it works inside.

Guru Ratikant Mohapatra's answer to my question suggests that this scientific approach to movement is derived from an interest in medical knowledge that guru Kelucharan Mohapatra presumably developed in the last decade of his life. However, the reference to this medical knowledge is part of the rhetoric that uses the term 'science' to bring dance to the level of the exact sciences, and in particular of western medicine.

When I asked Kumkum Lal to comment on the issue of technical 'perfection' in dance, she contested the idea of perfection, arguing that Odissi technique is rather very precise, but should not be considered a science. Thus, Kumkum equated perfection with science. In particular, she said:

So let us not make art into a science, otherwise it will become dead. It just becomes mechanical. So let them have the freedom... but beginners have to learn the methodology

and all the things. That does not mean that you can do what you feel like, even as a beginner.

Despite declining to use the term science, Kumkum Lal still agrees that a dancer has to learn the methodology or what Deeksha Sharma called the 'technicality' of the dance, in other words the 'science' of the dance. Only once the methodology is completely embodied, one is allowed to create and choreograph new things, and to have a certain freedom to slightly modify and adjust the items learned by the teacher. The 'scientific' approach to movement clearly also informs the experience of one's bodily boundaries as examined above. In fact, it is through a 'scientific' process of abstraction and de-individualisation that one's body is experienced in terms of geometrical shapes, as a combination of lines, points and angles, circles, squares and triangles.

Therefore, dancers use the terms science, mathematics and technicality to assert that Odissi dance vocabulary and practice is regulated by a very precise set of codes and rules that the practitioner has to know and scrupulously follow in order to dance in a 'correct' way. However, I propose dancers use the term science to give value to their practice, equating what they do and how they do it to the object and method of the exact sciences and in particular of western medical sciences.<sup>85</sup> To say that Odissi dance practice and vocabulary are like mathematics is to argue for their rigorous, methodical, systematic, calculated, objective character, all characteristics that are considered positive. As a form of scientific knowledge, Odissi is inherited from previous generations, rather than created by the individual artist; it belongs to an exclusive community of experts, rather than to a single performer; and it is largely objective in its aesthetic rules, rather than susceptible to subjective interpretation.

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<sup>85</sup> On the discourse about 'science' in modern India and its relationship with nationalism see Prakash (1992, 1999).

In addition, I suggest that 'the science behind the movement' is the embodied knowledge of the dance, that is to say the embodied understanding of the dance aesthetics. To know the science behind the movement is to know what needs to be done in order to dance correctly. In fact, dancers, through their practice, not only learn what is aesthetically correct, but they also learn how to dance correctly. They learn the technique behind the dance aesthetics. In this sense, this embodied 'scientific' knowledge is also what distinguishes initiated from non-initiated, practitioners from non-practitioners. Therefore, through training, dancers develop an exclusive 'scientific' knowledge of the dancing body.

This scientific approach pertains to somatic experience, that is to say to the experience of the body from within, while at the same time it takes the body, and in particular one's own body as an object of knowledge. In other words, the scientific knowledge behind the body is the whole of the technical rules behind the dance aesthetics, it pertains to what happens within the body's boundaries, and as such is accessible only to dance practitioners and represents their exclusive knowledge. In the following section, I examine how this 'scientific' method is applied in the practice of dance and how the body is experienced as a consequence of this scientific approach to movement.

## 5. MAPPING THE SPACE WITHIN

In the previous section, I suggested that Odissi dancers claim a scientific status for their practice and knowledge of the body, based on the fact that every movement in dance is executed with extreme accuracy, the distance between limbs is minutely calculated, the dance skills are methodically taught and the dance gestures are carefully selected according to their meanings. In this section I look in more depth at how the dancing body is experienced as being the object of this 'scientific' approach. As mentioned above, the

scientific approach to the dancing body pertains especially to the experience of the body within the boundaries defined by one's restricted kinesphere, while also including those boundaries when experienced in terms of lines, points and angles, and thus in terms of geometrical shapes.

I argue that, as object of scientific knowledge, the dancing body is made and experienced as dividual or, more precisely, partible, to use Busby's category, that is to say formed by parts that, despite being distinguished, are related to one another according to a precise set of aesthetic rules. However, I also suggest that in this dividual process the sense of the individuality of the body is far from being erased, not only because of the importance given to the experience of one's bodily boundaries, but also because of the emphasis put on 'amalgamating'<sup>86</sup> the movements of the different parts of the body in an integrated whole. Therefore, the training process is built on a tension between the experience of the body as an individual, bounded and distinctive entity and the experience of the body as a dividual space, within which parts are identified and distinguished, although always put in relation to each other. In this section I examine how Odissi dancers experience this tension between individual and dividual aspects of the practice.

To begin with, one of the first things that one learns during the basic training is that the dance vocabulary is derived from a combination of movements executed by single parts of the body. In particular, dancers learn that there are movements specific to hands, feet, torso, head, neck and eyes. Each of these movements is stylised and complex. For this reason, at the beginning of the training, students normally learn to move their major and minor limbs separately, rather than all at once. Priyambada Pattnaik explained how she used to teach the basic Odissi steps to her beginner students:

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<sup>86</sup> 'Amalgamating' as well as 'smooth' later on are put in inverted commas to emphasise the metaphorical value of these terms used by the practitioners.



When you start teaching, you start teaching first the steps. Once the steps are clear in the students' heads, then we will start teaching [*showing the arms*], because together, if you start teaching, they will be confused and they cannot catch one thing. [...] We start the steps, then you try to match the hands, then with the hands we try to match the neck.

When the neck is there, then we try to teach the eyes, then we try to teach the torso. So all five things they have to remember.

It is clear that the dancer experiences her body as made of parts that execute distinct movements, although eventually these movements are coordinated in a single complex movement that involves the whole body.

Priyambada's student, Moushumi Joshi, speaking about how she learned the basic units of movement, similarly explained:

The first thing that I do is to focus on my feet. Then I focus on the torso. Then I focus on the look that is the neck. [...] Sorry, before the neck, the hands.

In fact, when reporting their somatic experience, dancers often contended that one of the most difficult aspects of the basic training consisted of learning to coordinate the movements of the different parts of the body.

Despite the complexity of the movement vocabulary, practitioners argue that a dancing body appears aesthetically appealing only if the different movements of the body are not only executed correctly, but also and especially are 'amalgamated' into an integrated whole. The repetition of the basic Odissi steps is intended to achieve a 'smooth' quality in the coordination of the movements of the different body parts.

Deeksha Sharma, another among Priyambada Pattanik's students, although a beginner at the time of our interview, was already clearly aware that the different movements of the limbs needed to be appropriately coordinated, in order for the dance to be appealing. In fact, she said:

I have to focus on the feet, then on the head, expression, torso, but ultimately it has to be an amalgamation and coordination of all these things. Initially I was focusing a lot for feet and hands, but now I feel that I should try to coordinate everything from the beginning, the feet, the hands, the eyes, the expression with the smile. Otherwise it looks robotic, very technical.

By saying that she focuses on different parts of the body, Deeksha is supporting the claim that the body is experienced as made of parts which are clearly distinguished, although they eventually need to be 'amalgamated' into a coherent whole. This also suggests that while the science of dance defines how the body has to be used, a strict application of these rules does not necessarily makes a performer. In fact, dancers contend that what 'makes' one an Odissi dancer are all those nuances and accents in the movements that are not and cannot be codified, but only acquired through experience and keen observation.

Another recurring aspect in dancers' somatic experience is the division of the body into an upper and a lower part. The line of division between the top and the bottom half, as dancers often put it, is located just below the navel. This experience of the body as divided into two is often articulated through metaphorical images. For instance, dancers may compare the lower body to a pillar or a stone, and the upper body to water, or they may equate their body to a tree. The metaphor of the tree is especially useful to articulate the experience of a force pulling up and one pulling down. In fact, dancers argue that the lower body has to be kept extremely grounded, while the upper body has to be able to move freely, with resilience and flexibility. For instance, Amanda Geroy, describing the dancing body, said:

I always think of it like a tree, the lower part should be rooted and really strong, solid, and the upper half should be totally flexible, like the way trees' branches are... so they won't break.

Commenting on her initial difficulties in learning Odissi, my informant Sonali Mishra argued:

Another difficult part was just remembering that division between the bottom half and the top half, because Odissi has got the *tāṇḍava* and the *lāsya* part. The upper part of your body is supposed to be very very soft, but the bottom part is supposed to be very solid, like Śiva.

Dancers experience a division between lower and upper body and give culturally specific meanings to it. In particular, dancers associate the lower body with the *tāṇḍava* energy and with experiences of power, strength, control, rhythm and discrete movements, all elements which are considered masculine, while they associate the upper body with the *lāsya* energy and hence with ideas of grace, subtleness, circular and continuous movements, as well as with melody, all characteristics deemed to be 'naturally' feminine. Thus, by embodying the dance technique, Odissi practitioners embody two completely different qualities of movement. However, although clearly distinguished, the movements of the lower and upper body are immediately integrated in a coherent whole. In particular, as mentioned in the previous chapter, dancers learn to experience the movements of the top half as consequent and dependent on the movements of the bottom half.

The relationship between the bottom and the top half is established and naturalised through practice, in accordance with culturally specific meanings. In fact, I suggest that the relationship between lower and upper body can be further illuminated through the religious icon of the *Ardhanārīśvara*. The *Ardhanārīśvara* is the representation of the co-presence of Lord Śiva and his wife Pārvatī within an individual body. However, the body is here vertically, rather than horizontally divided, with the left side being feminine and the right side being masculine.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> For an examination of the figure of the *Ardhanārīśvara* see Goldberg (1999).



**FIG. 15: ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA (BY IGNACIO MORENO)**

**GATE OF THE LINGARAJ TEMPLE, BHUBANESWAR**

Like the body of the Ardhanārīśvara, the Odissi dancing body too is formed as a combination and integration of masculine and feminine elements, identified with the tāṇḍava and lāsya energies, which are respectively associated with Lord Śiva and his wife Pārvatī. Through the reference to the mythological characters of Śiva and Pārvatī, the relationship between upper and lower body is articulated not simply in kinetic and abstract terms, but also and especially in social terms. It is a relationship between genders, and more specifically between the social figures of husband and wife. Hence, by embodying the tāṇḍava and lāsya energies and by conceiving the body as made of two halves, one associated with feminine qualities and the other with masculine qualities, the dancer's body becomes the site of a relationship considered crucial for the fulfilment of the

individual in society. In other terms, the body of the practitioner becomes a relational body, where the most important social bond, the bond between husband and wife, is incarnated and represented as a unified and integrated whole.

To be precise, the body in Odissi is horizontally divided into three rather than two parts: the lower body from the waist down, the torso from the waist to the neck, and finally the head. In fact, the basic training consists of learning how to move legs, torso and head in opposite directions, by isolating the torso. However, in their narratives, practitioners hardly distinguish the movements of the torso from those of the head and normally refer to the upper body as a whole. I argue that this depends on the fact that dancers perceive their movements in terms of energies and qualities rather than in terms of mechanical actions, so that head and arms become part of the upper body, because they share with it its resilient, soft and graceful quality.<sup>88</sup>

Another important element that emerges in dancers' somatic experience and that I argue depends on the scientific approach to the dancing body and makes the body partible is the identification of a vertical line that runs through the spine of the dancer, perpendicularly dividing the dancing kinesphere. This line is often associated with terms such as centre, balance or sense of gravity. Dancers experience their movements as being executed mostly around this vertical axis. However, this sense of perpendicularity is most of the time only referential, in that in the Odissi movement vocabulary the body is often displaced, moving away from and around this central axis. This is particularly true for the movements of the upper body. In fact, while the torso is continuously shifted from side to side and around the axis, the legs are kept rooted in the central vertical line.

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<sup>88</sup> It must be mentioned that the *lāsya* energy is also used in the execution of certain leg movements, for example in the Odissi distinctive walk, in which the feet move in a curvilinear shape. Similarly, the *tāṇḍava* energy is sometimes used in the upper body, for example in the representation of certain masculine mythological characters, such as demons or warriors, and in general in the execution of certain narrative actions. However, these are experienced by dancers as exceptions to the rule that associates the lower body with the *tāṇḍava* energy and the upper body with the *lāsya* energy.

Moushumi Joshi described how she went through learning the basic step 'cauka 2', by saying:

So, when you lift one foot, your body weight tends to go to the right side and then to the left side. Again, the trick over there is to maintain the body weight to the centre, just lifting your feet, but maintaining your body weight.

Similarly, in tribhaṅga, the movements of the upper body are executed by moving the torso away and around this imaginary axis. In fact, most of the movement vocabulary of Odissi consists of 'leaving' the centre line while constantly keeping it as a reference point.

Dancers also experience several points, along this vertical axis, from which movements are deemed to originate (see Fig. 12). These points are situated on the top of the head, between the eyes, at the centre of the throat, in the middle of the chest, and just below the navel. From these points the movements of the head, eyes, neck and torso originate, while the navel, as mentioned above, defines the distinction between lower and upper body and corresponds to the experience of two opposed forces, one pulling up and the other pulling down. All these points along the vertical axis are marked by the presence of jewellery in the canonical dance costume.

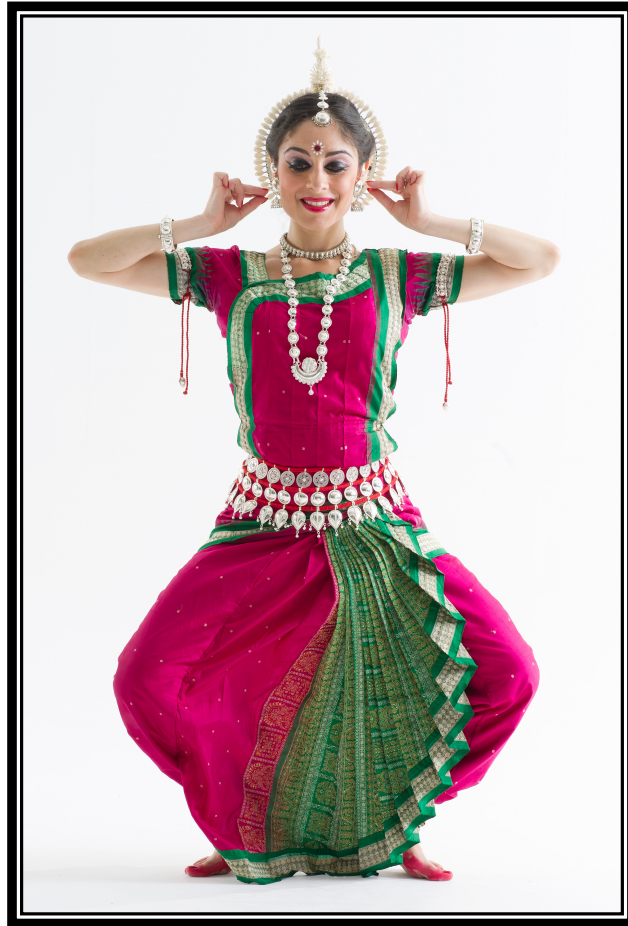


FIG. 16: ODISSI FULL COSTUME AND JEWELLERY (BY SIMON RICHARDSON)

In fact, the silver set that the dancer is expected to wear comprises a belt, that evidences the division between lower and upper body, a long necklace, which covers the point located in the middle of the chest, a shorter necklace around the neck, and a red dot between the eyebrows, in the place of the third eye. On top of the head dancers wear the *tahia*, a piece of the dance's headgear, which is said to recall and symbolise the top of traditional temples in Orissa.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the dancing body is also compared to sacred temple architecture. On the analogy between the dancing body of the *māhāris* and the architectonic structure of temples in Orissa see Banerji (2012).



FIG. 17: LANGARAJ TEMPLE, BHUBANESWAR (BY IGNACIO MORENO)

Other important points in the body from which movements originate are situated in the joints of arms and legs, particularly in the wrists and ankles, where again the dancers wear silver jewellery. In fact, most Odissi movements are executed by creating straight or more often circular lines originating in these joints. All these elements in the jewellery mark the different parts of the body, distinguishing them from each other.

Dancers also speak about the experience of pressure points in the body. For instance, Sonali Mishra said:

I think the best way to learn is having that understanding physically what it feels like, because there should be some pressure points in your body.



Therefore, these points, that dancers experience both within and on their bodily boundaries, together with the horizontal and vertical lines identified and discussed above draw a sort of embodied map, which is at the same time the tool and the result of what dancers define as a scientific approach to the dancing body. In fact, as a 'scientific' tool, this embodied map provides the practitioner with the correct reference points and orientations for executing the movements in an aesthetically correct way, while at the same time it 'produces' the experience of the body as an abstract entity and a space within and through which movements take place.

In short, I argue that through a scientific approach to movement, the dancing body is made divisible and more precisely partible. This means that the body is experienced as made of parts, which are clearly distinguished and sometimes trained separately or involved in executing qualitatively different movements. However, these parts are always put in relation to each other according to a precise set of rules which acquire culturally specific meanings, as shown by the analogy between the Odissi dancing body and the icon of the Ardhanārīśvara. In this and the previous two sections, I have examined the discourses and practices that support this experience of the body as partible and as an object of scientific knowledge and methods. I have also argued that this scientific approach especially concerns somatic experience within one's bodily boundaries and therefore is related to the somatic understanding of the dance vocabulary and of the dancing body that practitioners develop during training.

Finally, I have claimed that this scientific approach has to do with 'technique', which means with the kinetic rules that lie behind the aesthetics of the dance and especially define the use and experience of the body as a visual object. This scientific approach and its rules distinguish an 'initiate' from a 'non-initiate', separating the dance community from the rest on the basis of an exclusive knowledge of the body. In the following sections, I examine how the body of the dancer is made permeable by entering in a complex system of

relationships with the surrounding environment and with entities, both real and imaginary, located outside the boundaries of the dancing body. In particular, I look at how these relationships are established and experienced in terms of circulation of energies and emotions.

## 6. POROUS CONTAINERS AND FLUID CONTENTS

While from a 'scientific' point of view dancers experience their bodies as an abstract and visual entity that assumes geometrical shapes, when they speak about the body in more figurative terms, dancers compare it to a container having porous surfaces. An analysis of dancers' narratives suggests that this body-container holds and can be traversed by energies and substances which are normally experienced as fluid. I suggest that this experience of the bodily boundaries as having a porous quality and being traversed by fluid substances provides dancers with an understanding of the body as permeable, to use the other category of the *dividual* proposed by Busby.

Dancers experience their moving bodies as being a frame between an inner and an outer space. This frame is continuously traversed by energies that flow establishing relationships between the dancer's body and the social and divine bodies.<sup>90</sup> Particularly important in Odissi somatic experience are the relationships that the dancer establishes through her dancing body with the audience, whether real or imaginary, and with her guru's bodiliness. Therefore, in this section, I examine the terms dancers use to articulate their experience of the body as a container that holds substances that must flow through one's bodily boundaries. Then, I examine the relationship that dancers establish, through this flow of

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<sup>90</sup> On the relationships between the human body, the social body, the body of the cosmos and the divine body in Hinduism see Holdrege (1998).

substances, with the audience as well as with the guru by allowing their bodily boundaries to be permeable.

Odissi dancers are adamant in expecting the dancing body to have not only a correct form, but also content. If the forms of the dancing body are often described in terms of geometrical shapes and can be acquired through technical training and through a scientific approach to movement, corresponding to the visual appearance of the dancing body, the content of the dance is a more complex concept. This content is often experienced and articulated as something that flows and, in fact, must flow through one's bodily boundaries. Unless there is this continuous flow of content, neither training nor performance can be successful, both on the aesthetic and the moral plane.

In order to describe the content of the dancing body, Odissi practitioners sometimes use the metaphor of water. In particular, they compare the body of the dancer to a porous container that must be opened, filled, emptied, and whose content has eventually to be shared. Kavita Dwivedi explained this metaphor by saying:

Because the practice is like... how to say... you have filled yourself with water, so when the pot has been put, so the pot will remain as it is. But if you have not filled it, and you want to give it to somebody, the water will fall down.

These words suggest not only that the dancing body is experienced as a container, that must be filled with content, which has to be carried and eventually shared, but also that the content is not generated within the container, but it comes from somewhere else. More precisely it is 'put' in the container, through practice, by the guru. If the practice has been done correctly, and the container has been appropriately shaped, the body will be able to carry this content and share it with the audience. In short, by developing the dance skills the dancer is able to 'collect', 'hold' and 'share'<sup>91</sup> the content of her dance. But the content

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<sup>91</sup> Terms such as 'put', 'collect', 'hold' and 'share' are in inverted commas as used by the dancers as metaphors to articulate somatic experience.

of the dance, and therefore the dance itself, does not strictly belong to the body of the dancer. It is only provisionally contained in it.

Although often articulated through the metaphor of the water, the 'content' of the dance is also variably experienced and described in terms of energy. In fact, in the practice of Odissi, energy is always thought to go in and out of the body, passing through its boundaries.

Dancers often speak of specific forms of energy, as the energy of the music, or the energy of a particular character they are interpreting, or simply the energy of a certain emotion or action they are portraying. In a more general sense, dancers use the term energy also to describe the positive effect of a successful performance, hence overlapping this concept with that of *rasa* or aesthetic accomplishment.

Dancers' narratives on somatic experience reveal that the dancing body always interacts with something, whether a real or imaginary object, subject or substance, and it does so through flows of energy. For instance, Carolina Prada said:

I feel that Odissi [...] has to have energy, and it has to have content, like your hands... they are not putting strength, they are not pushing something, but they have to feel that energy is flowing through your fingers. Energy definitely has to be there, but it has to be shown.

According to Carolina, dance gestures hold a content-energy, but they also become a permeable frame through which these energies must 'visibly' flow. The idea of 'pushing' something that surrounds one's bodily boundaries carries similarities with Sonali Mishra's experience of pressure points on the body. Along similar lines, Amanda Geroy, recalling the corrections given to her by the guru, argued:

If I naturally feel that some place is tight, usually it is like trying to force it into where it is supposed to go.

Therefore, it seems that dancers experience their body as moving within a dense atmosphere against which they have to exercise some form of pressure or force. The

dancer moves by 'pushing' this atmosphere and, in so doing, she experiences the space around her as filled by energy that goes in and out of her bodily boundaries. In order to help her students understand this feeling of moving against something, rather than in an 'empty' space, during training, the guru may exercise pressure on particular points of the student's body, 'materialising' the resistance one has to apply, with her limbs, when dancing.

In abhinaya, energy is experienced and used in a slightly different way. Here, in fact, the use and flow of energy establishes codified meanings. For instance, dancers argue that the characters portrayed in dance have specific energies, as Amanda who said that Śiva's energy 'has qualities such as emptiness and strength'. The energy of the characters is expressed differently depending on the actions they are performing, the psychophysical state in which they are while performing those actions, and the imaginary objects and subjects they are interacting with. Through the appropriate use and flow of energy the dancer is able to portray a whole universe of imaginary characters and scenarios. Therefore, in abhinaya, energy flows and materialises through the interactions that the dancer imaginatively entertains with objects, characters and spaces.

By making her body permeable, through the skilful management of energetic transactions the dancer embodies the world. As in the case of Yoga, in Odissi too the body 'mimetically' becomes the cosmos (Alter, 2004: 44). According to Alter, by embodying the cosmos, the duality between self and reality is eradicated and a sense of liberation is achieved. Like in pure dance, in pantomimic dance too, the body of the dancer has to become permeable in order to allow energies to flow, generating codified meaning and relationships. These relationships may involve both real subjects, as in the case of the audience and the guru, but also imaginary objects, characters and substances that inhabit the dancer's fantasy and that constitute the mythological cosmos in which the dancing body moves. Hence, through the skilful management of energy, the dancer is able to reproduce and embody this

imaginary world, by making her body permeable and by 'becoming' the object, character or substance she is representing or interacting with.

In short, the body of the dancer is experienced as permeable in that it is continuously engaged, through the skilful use and flow of energies, in managing relationships, whether real or imaginary, that 'substantially' transform the body itself, that is to say its appearance and its experience. Therefore, to say that the dancing body is permeable is to emphasise its relational character and the effect that this has on the experience of the body itself. In the next section, I examine how the dancing body is experienced as permeable in relation to a real or imaginary audience, through the use of gaze and the experience of *rasa*, as well as in relation to one's guru's bodiliness.

## 7. OPENING BOUNDARIES, TYING BONDS

The dancing body is constructed in Odissi as a relational and permeable body in particular through the use of gaze. In fact, both in pure and in pantomimic dance, dancers always use their gaze as they were interacting with someone else, whether a real audience is present or not. In *abhinaya*, the dancer may interact, through her gaze, with the deity she is addressing in her danced prayer or with other characters that appear in the narration of the choreographed story. However, in the whole movement vocabulary of Odissi the dancer is constantly watching and being watched by a real or imaginary other. This characteristic of the dance technique, where the use of the gaze is often codified and carefully reproduced, supports the idea that the dancing body is constantly engaged in a relationship with something or someone else that gives meaning to the dance.

The specific way in which the gaze is used in Odissi reveals that the dancer is ideally never alone. She always dances in the presence of someone else, whether this someone else is a real or an imaginary audience or a character she is interacting with. This interaction visibly 'affects' the experience and appearance of the body. The dancer looks at someone and experiences herself as being looked at by someone. For this reason, the dancer has to be able to simultaneously feel her body from within, and to take care of how her body looks from without. The movement vocabulary is developed around this dialectic of gazes from within and from without. The dancer lives and moves in between an inner universe of feelings and thoughts and an outer universe of visual appearance and aesthetic projections.

I propose that this duality of the gaze as it is used in Odissi can be further understood if related to the Hindu religious practice, called *darśan*. Darśan is the practice that the devotee undertakes by going to the temple to see and be seen by the representation of the divine (Eck, 2007). In the practice of darśan, the eyes become a powerful frame through which an energetic, emotional and spiritual flow takes place.<sup>92</sup> As a result of this exchange of gazes, the devotee is 'substantially' transformed by the presence of the deity. Similarly, through the specific use of the gaze, the appearance and experience of the dancing body is 'substantially' transformed and a bond is established with the divine presence addressed in the dance as well as with the real audience. By constantly watching and being watched, the dancer's body is experienced as permeable, as a frame through which energies and meanings flow.

The experience of at the same time watching and being watched structures not only the dance movement vocabulary but also dancers' embodied experience in daily practice. In fact, dancers often argue that, even when they practise by themselves, they always imagine being in front of 1000 eyes watching them. Kavita Dwivedi, for instance, claimed:

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<sup>92</sup> On the importance of gaze in Hinduism see Babb (1981). On the relationship between darśan and abhinaya see Coorlawala (1996) and on the connection between the practice of darśan and the experience of rasa see Chakravorty (2004).

when we do our practice, then of course nobody is there to watch. But if you ask me personally, even if I am practicing, I see thousands of eyes watching me.

Ileana Citaristi articulated this experience in terms of performative presence, so she said:

when I rehearse, I tend to do the full rehearsal, in the sense not just to remember, so I am quite totally present also in the rehearsal.

To do the 'full rehearsal' means to dance as if a real audience was present and watching the performer. This means that, even when practicing alone, dancers imagine dancing in front of a 'real' audience. These words confirm that the aesthetic body of the performer is experienced as a permeable body, a body that acquires aesthetic sense only by entering into relationships with other 'bodies', real or imaginary, that 'substantially' change its experience and appearance.

I also suggest that the classical aesthetic theory of *rasa* itself is grounded on the same experience of the dancing body as permeable. According to this aesthetic theory that is applied to the whole of Hindu performing arts, the ultimate purpose of a performance is that of generating the experience of *rasa* or aesthetic pleasure in the audience (Schechner, 2001; Schwartz, 2008). The performer generates *rasa* by conveying emotions, or *bhāva*, in an aesthetic rather than a pedestrian way. Therefore, *rasa* is the result of a communicative process in which emotions are expressed and communicated through highly stylised performative skills. While emotions are thought to be latent in the performer's mind, the skills necessary to aesthetically communicate these emotions to the audience are learned through training and practice. Hence, through training, dancers learn to express these latent emotions in an aesthetically relevant way in order to provide *rasa* to the audience. The *rasa* theory is grounded on the idea that the dancing body must be permeable, in that emotions can and in fact must reach out through the performative skills, in order to 'touch' and give *rasa* or aesthetic pleasure to the audience. Through the experience of *rasa*, a relationship is established between the performer and the audience. This relationship is



experienced as a flow of energy. For instance, Amanda Geroy described a successful performance in the following terms:

the dancer should also be filled with śakti, with energy, divine energy, so when the dance is over that divine vibration just resonates in the hall, in the audience, creating vibes.

Therefore, dancers often conceive rasa in terms of śakti or energy and they argue that the performer has to share this energy with the audience for aesthetic fulfilment to be experienced. I suggest that the experience of rasa is based on the idea that the dancing body is a permeable frame through which energies, in the form of emotions, flow, 'substantially' affecting the subjects involved in the communicative process, by generating the experience of rasa.

The experience of the body as a permeable container finds an interesting expression also in the way dancers conceive the learning process and the relationship between student and guru. In fact, Odissi practitioners often contend that the dance training is successful only if one is able to 'open', 'empty' and 'fill'<sup>93</sup> oneself with the guru's teaching and therefore with the dance itself. These terms dancers use to articulate the learning process and the relationship they establish with their guru are grounded in the experience of the body as a container that has to be filled with certain substances and, in fact, with the dance itself.

An analysis of the practitioners' narratives reveals that Odissi dance as an aesthetic form is experienced not as belonging to the individual dancer, but as being a 'substance' that is only provisionally 'put' in the body-container of the performer, during the training, but that must be shared during one's public performance, in order to allow the audience to experience rasa. This conception of the dance and of the dancer's body as a container is reflected in the generalised preoccupation with maintaining unaltered the choreographic compositions and the dance form itself. While this preoccupation with transmitting the

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<sup>93</sup> These terms are used by dancers as metaphors to articulate somatic experience.

dance items as accurately as possible can be in part attributed to issues of traditionalism, it must also be understood in relation to the idea of the body of the performer as being a frame, traversed by a flow of meanings and energies that do not strictly belong to the individual, but are only provisionally 'put' into her aesthetically shaped body.

Through the training, a dance student metaphorically 'marries' her guru's bodiliness. In fact, in order for the learning process to be successful, the student has to surrender to her teacher's material, and in surrendering she metaphorically 'opens' herself to that specific relationship and to the flow of dance material that this entails, substantially 'becoming' her guru's bodiliness. Therefore, in order to acquire the dance technique, the practitioner has to enter into a profound and subtle relationship with her guru's bodiliness, mainly based on the keen observation of the teacher's dancing body. This subtle connection with the guru's bodiliness allows a gradual transformation of the student's own bodiliness.

The bodiliness of the guru is re-inscribed into the bodiliness of the student. The student's dancing body visibly carries the mark of this social relationship.<sup>94</sup> In order for the transformative process to take place, the disciple has to be able to offer her bodiliness as a porous container, by 'opening' and 'emptying' it in order to allow the absorption of the distinctive aesthetics of the dance. In this respect, Carolina Prada suggested that there are many aspects in the dance, which, during the learning process, cannot be understood unless one is able to open herself to the teaching of her guru. In fact, she said:

This is a very magical thing about dance: you have to empty yourself. [...] You just have to watch very very deeply, you have to absorb with your eyes, and definitely not with your mind, it is like you're sinking in the person. You are just watching and watching, watching

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<sup>94</sup> For this reason, I suggest, to change guru is for dancers often a difficult choice. In fact, this change requires the practitioner to 're-make' her dancing body, by 'deleting' as much as possible the signs of her previous guru's bodiliness. It could be said that, by changing guru, the dancer undergoes an experience almost comparable to a second conjugal union.

and watching, and whatever you are watching is like coming into yourself and it is transforming itself into a feeling.

These words are very evocative and clearly articulate the experience of the dancing body as a permeable container that must be opened, emptied and filled with the content-dance, where this content seems to flow directly from the teacher to the student, for being then shared with the audience. The expression 'sinking in the person' reveals this almost symbiotic relationship that the dancer establishes between her own and her guru's bodiliness and which enables the success of the training process.

In short, in this section I have contended that the use of the gaze in dance, the aesthetic theory of rasa as well as the way dancers intend the relationship between students and guru support the experience of the body as a permeable and porous container through which emotions, energies, ideas and meanings flow, creating relationships between the performer and audience, whether real or imaginary, as well as between the disciple and her guru. These relationships 'substantially' affect the experience and appearance of the dancing body, making it not only aesthetically but also socially 'appropriate'. The aesthetic body of the performer becomes a locus of complex relationships that take place both within and through one's bodily boundaries. Within the boundaries, these relationships are established between 'parts' of one's body which, despite being clearly distinguished, are connected one to the other according to precise rules that acquire culturally specific meanings. Through the bodily boundaries, these relationships are established between the dancer's body and the body of the guru and of the audience, whether this audience is real or imaginary.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have discussed how dancers experience their bodies in dance. I have suggested that the dance training is conceived as a process of aesthetic refinement through which the 'real' body of the practitioner is gradually 'shaped' as the 'ideal' body of the performer. Therefore, I have examined what this claim actually entails. I have argued that in this process of aesthetic refinement the individual body of the practitioner is made 'dividual'. This means that the body is experienced as 'partible' or made of parts that are related to each other according to precise aesthetic rules. But this also means that the body is experienced as 'permeable' or related to other bodies, through the continuous flow of energies.

As part of the process of refinement enabled by the training, the body is 'scientifically' treated, experienced as an abstract entity and described in terms of lines, points and geometrical shapes. In this respect, I have suggested that dancers use the discourses about the scientific character of both the dance vocabulary and of the learning process in order to claim the value of their exclusive bodily knowledge and to equate it to that of the medical sciences. However, I have highlighted that these discourses also contribute to the rhetoric of self-erasure that underpins the practice and aesthetics of this dance.

The guru plays a crucial role in this process, on the one hand providing a living example of the ideal dancing body and on the other hand facilitating the process of refinement, skilfully adjusting the individual body of the dancer to the aesthetic requirements of the form and the dance aesthetic canon to the features of the practitioner's body.

I have proposed that in order for the aesthetic refinement to take place, the body of the practitioner has to become 'permeable' and to allow energies to flow and to establish relationships with other bodies whether real or imaginary. In this respect, I have discussed

the metaphor of the body-container and how this informs the relationships between student and guru, as well as between performer and audience.

In short, in this chapter I have examined how the process of refinement that training entails affects dancers' embodied experience, contributing to the sense of self-erasure through discourses about sciences and establishing the social morality of the dance aesthetics through discourses about transmission and performance.

## LAYER II: *MINDS*

### OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter I examine how Odissi practitioners experience and talk about the mind in the practice of dance. I argue that somatic experience in Odissi is characterised by a tension between training and performance and that this tension concerns how practitioners perceive and articulate the relationships between physical and mental states in dance. I suggest that while the training encourages the distinction between mind and body, a performance is considered successful only if the dancer experiences her body and mind as being one. This experience of 'body-mind oneness' is considered extraordinary and associated with a sense of self-transcendence. I propose that the experience of body-mind relationships in the practice of Odissi can be understood in terms of different forms of consciousness, which I define as *pre-consciousness*, *self-consciousness*, *dis-consciousness* and *performative consciousness*.

In the following pages, I first take into account the discourses that 'construct' the mind as distinct from the body and that establish culturally specific ways of intending body-mind relationships. I suggest that these discourses and experiences are coherent with the categories provided by the Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophical system. Then, I examine how Odissi practitioners experience and articulate body-mind relationships in dance, explaining them in terms of different forms of consciousness. In particular, I look at the practices that

encourage or discourage these particular experiences and at the narratives dancers use to articulate and share them in a culturally consistent way. Finally, I examine the role music plays in the experience of body-mind relationships in Odissi.

## 1. THE PLACE OF THE MIND

Odissi dancers often refer to mind, mental states and mental processes both when training and when speaking about the experience of performing for an audience. However, experiences and discourses about the mind occur and are always articulated in relation to experiences and discourses about the body. Although dancers clearly distinguish the mind from the body, by distinguishing one's mental faculties from one's physical abilities, the two are always considered in relation to each other. Therefore, to talk about the mind in the practice of Odissi is more precisely to talk about body-mind relationships.

Dancers identify the mind with processes such as grasping, understanding, observing, listening, feeling, memorising and recalling, as well as with states such as concentration, focus, awareness and attention. They also associate the mind with will, emotion, imagery, memory, meaning and mental representations. Finally they consider the mind as the 'organ' in charge of sensing and monitoring the positions, orientations, movements and sensations of the body from within.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, dancers demonstrate a complex and heterogeneous experience of the mind and mental processes, states and objects involved in their dance practice. The way dancers speak about the mind suggests that they identify it with a variety of processes. These processes can be accessed and articulated, to varying degrees, whether through words or through mental representations, such as visual images, aural perceptions, tactile sensations and kinesthetic feelings.

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<sup>95</sup> This cognitive faculty is normally known as proprioception.

Although dance training focuses on the development of physical skills and the 'making' of the dancing body, an analysis of somatic experience, of the transmission processes and of the discourses about performance that circulate among dancers, shows that mind and mental processes are central to the embodied experience of dance. This is true to the extent that for dancers the dancing body is mostly the result of the activity of the mind, and performance is considered largely unsuccessful, if one's mind fails to be fully present in the action performed. Sonali Mishra for instance argued 'the mind plays a huge part in the process. [...]. A lot of that is mentally understanding and translating it into your body'. Amanda Geroy explained that without mental focus in performance 'you can forget the dance. [...] It is all mental, that is why the practice is so important: that we practise mentally'.

The distinction between mental faculties and physical abilities is particularly emphasised in the first stages of training through the distinction between one's capacity to understand and one's capacity to do something. Odissi practitioners often argue that one has to first understand in order to be able to dance correctly. 'To understand' means to know how certain skills must be performed, while 'to do' means to actually be able to perform those skills.

While dancers recognise that one's physical attributes may be a concrete advantage or disadvantage to the development of dance skills, the body is never perceived as a barrier to the acquisition and improvement of the dance vocabulary. In fact, as discussed in the previous chapter, the body of the practitioner is considered, at least in principle, more predisposed to change than her mind. While dancers often speak about 'making' or 'shaping' the dancing body, when they talk about the mind they hardly go beyond the idea that this can be disciplined, rather than strictly trained or shaped. For instance, guru



Ratikant Mohapatra argued that one's mind is inborn and cannot 'substantially' change. He clearly said:

The capacity of your understanding and your mind, your attitude, that is inborn. You cannot change it by training.

The claim that the student's mind cannot be trained or controlled by the guru is reiterated in relation to different dance skills, among others the capacity to memorise and recall dance compositions as well as to imbue the movements with appropriate emotions. When in teaching a complex choreography the guru insists that it is up to the individual student to accurately memorise the sequence of steps and admits that different students may need different time to achieve this same goal, the teacher is contending that memory depends only on the individual student's mind and as such cannot be strictly instructed or controlled by someone else. The training itself does not directly aim at developing or improving cognitive skills as such, despite heavily relying on them.

Along similar lines, dancers argue that abhinaya cannot be taught. While dancers learn the sequence of movements and are told, often in great detail, the meanings of the gestures and facial expressions they execute, they are eventually expected to be able to 'process' with their minds the kinetic and semantic information provided by the guru and to imbue their gestures and actions with the appropriate emotions. However, the teacher can only help the student understand the meanings beyond the dance gestures and express these meanings and emotions in an aesthetically adequate way, but the guru cannot, strictly speaking, teach an emotion. Emotions and the capacity to appropriately associate them to the dance movements pertain to the student's mind.

However, this apparently deterministic view of the mind, articulated by guru Ratikant Mohapatra, contrasts with the embodied experience reported by other practitioners. In fact, most of the dancers involved in this research, while talking about their mind as

something given or inborn, also asserted that their capacity to understand, observe, listen, feel and focus had improved with the acquisition of skills, expertise and experience. In other words, physical training and motor skills had improved their mental processes. For instance, speaking about the capacity to perceive the subtleties of the Odissi dance vocabulary, Carolina Prada explained that:

It is like a discovery. [...] If you do not have experience, it is very difficult to be able to... it is even impossible to do it, or to see it. You can't even see it.

Therefore, with the acquisition of skills and expertise one is able to 'see' things that a neophyte will not even be able to notice.

Along similar lines, Sonali Mishra explained that her capacity to observe movement and to reproduce it with her body had become more accurate and systematic with experience. She said:

I think it is a lot about maturity, because when the body becomes engrained in the process, you know what to look for. [...] Over the years, the more I learned, the more my observation became refined. I try to understand what is the movement that I am necessarily not doing [correctly] and how I can incorporate that movement.

Priyambada Pattnaik gave more evidence of this mental refinement talking about the capacity to concentrate while performing for an audience. She explained:

When you are very young, in the student period, and you are learning very little things and you have not complete confidence about your work, you feel like: 'how do I have to dance? I have to complete my item. How much stamina do I have? How could I express? How many audience members are sitting there?' You will think only about this, when you start from the very beginning. But performing for 10 to 12 years, then you start growing in that way. You will never feel how it was at the very beginning. You get experience.

These claims suggest that one's mental capacities to observe, understand, as well as to focus or to portray emotions do improve with the acquisition of skills, expertise and experience.

In short, the mind is transformed by the acquisition of the skills, as much as the dancing body is shaped by the mind. Most dancers also argued that the dance practice had made them not only stronger physically, but also more determined and confident mentally, suggesting that the development of the skills had affected their minds and mental attitudes. Similarly, in his examination of embodied experience in kalaripayattu, Zarrilli (1998) has argued that the training of the body must precede the training of the mind, but it eventually affects and transforms the mind of the practitioner and, hence, experience itself.

The way Odissi dancers speak about the mind also suggests that mental states and processes are embodied, in that they cannot be conceived independently from the body. However, dancers also admit that the mind can be experienced as disembodied or more precisely as disengaged from the body and the action performed. This is the case of when one performs an action while thinking about something else. Dancers consider this disembodied condition of the mind in negative terms. For instance, while they admit the possibility of doing 'blind practice,' that is to say to practise 'absentmindedly' or 'mechanically,' they consider 'blind practice' useless if not counter-productive. They support this claim arguing that if one gets used to practicing 'absentmindedly,' one will also end performing without full presence of mind, and in doing so one may, in the best case, fail to engage the audience and, in the worst case, forget the dance composition. In both circumstances, the performance is considered aesthetically inadequate.

Dancers define the relationship between body and mind, and the experience of the mind as embodied in terms of 'connection' or 'concentration'. For instance, guru Ratikant Mohapatra explained:

When I teach my students, it is very clear over there. I can read their mind. When I show them something, there are many students that grasp the movement very fast. As soon as they see, they can do. A few students are there, they will see you doing something - suppose you are doing A - they will see A, but they will do B. They cannot connect. And there are a few other students: they will do it, but it will take them much time to remember.

In this excerpt, guru Ratikant Mohapatra is articulating the distinction between mental faculties and physical abilities by establishing a distinction between the capacity to 'grasp' or 'understand' something and the capacity to actually 'do' something. He is also implicitly arguing for a priority of mental over physical processes, supporting the idea that it is the mind that initiates the learning process and he is also describing the interaction between mind and body in terms of connection.

Guru Ratikant Mohapatra also explained to me that there are two forms of concentration, which he defined in terms of inner and outer concentration. He said:

The inner concentration is when you are focusing inside, when you are achieving something, or learning something, and when you are interacting with your teacher. When the teacher explains you many things about the technique, about the meaning of the song, about the dance. When you are grasping something, your mind is only concentrated on the subject. [...] Outer concentration is related to force, when the force is going outwards. [...] At the same time, it is the concentration that links your mind and the [body] line. To hold this line, only your mind can instruct.

Therefore, according to guru Ratikant, there is a form of concentration that pertains to the process of understanding and learning, and a form of concentration that entails the

capacity to connect the understanding of the mind with the execution of the body and allows 'the force to go outwards.' This second form of concentration pertains to performance and in general corresponds to the application of knowledge already acquired.

For dancers, concentration is the faculty of connecting body and mind, whether in training or in performance. For instance, Priyambada Pattnaik contended that through concentration one is able to learn things and improve quickly. Speaking about concentration in performance, Sujata Mohapatra argued that:

Without concentration dance is not possible, because if you lose your concentration, in between, here and there, you forget the dance. Maybe you practise every day, but it doesn't matter. You have to have your concentration like 100%. Then only the body and the mind go as gel, they go in a track. Otherwise you get very very distracted.

Therefore, concentration is about experiencing one's body and mind as 'going' together.

Consequently, in lack of concentration, one's mind is experienced as disembodied.

However, concentration in learning and in performing generates different experiences, as I will discuss in the following sections.

I suggest that the way dancers conceive the body, the mind and the relationships between physical and mental processes, is coherent with the Sāṅkhya-Yoga categories of embodied experience. As described in the introduction, in the Sāṅkhya-Yoga tradition body and mind are substantially the same as they are both made of matter. However, they differ in terms of degree, the body being gross matter and the mind being subtle matter. Body and mind form a compound in that they come together and stand in an ontological continuum, being both made of matter. As such they affect each other. The subtle nature of the mind allows it to survive the decay of the gross body and to reincarnate in other bodies. The mind stores information from previous lives and defines the 'character' and 'psychological attitude' of the individual, while the body is determined by one's parents' genetic heritage.

This view of the mind as inborn and inherited from previous lives could explain guru Ratikant Mohapatra's claim that mind is resistant to change. However, the Sāṅkhya-Yoga categories also explain how changes become possible, through the transformation or refinement of the gross body. If the mind were not able to change at all, then it would not be possible to refine one's self and to reincarnate in superior forms of life, in order to eventually achieve mokṣa, which is, according to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, the ultimate aim of life.

In the Sāṅkhya-Yoga tradition, the mind must not be confused with consciousness, as consciousness is ontologically different from the mind and residing beyond it. However, due to its subtle quality, the mind can enjoy some degree of consciousness. Therefore, the mind is to consciousness what the moon is to the sun: its light is not an intrinsic quality but a reflection of something else's intrinsic quality.

Depending on the degree of consciousness that the subtle matter is able to enjoy, the mind may be defined as *manas*, *ahaṅkāra* and *buddhi*. The compound *manas*, *ahaṅkāra* and *buddhi* is sometimes defined as *citta*. *Manas* is taken to correspond to the cognitive processes carried out with a minimal degree of consciousness and strictly depending on the senses. *Ahaṅkāra* has been described as the ego-maker,<sup>96</sup> where the ego is intended as the sense of self as distinct from any other individual self. *Ahaṅkāra* corresponds to the capacity of the individual self to recognise one's body and mind as being one's own. Finally *buddhi* is the higher form of cognition, based on the capacity to discriminate and act upon reality. It is the faculty of the subtle matter to act as an agent over the gross matter, in the form of will power. Finally, in Sāṅkhya-Yoga, the ultimate aim of psychophysical practices is to achieve a state of body-mind oneness, which is called *samādhi* and in which, by experiencing a state of psychophysical unity, one is able to experience a sense of transcendence of both the subtle and gross body. *Samādhi* is

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<sup>96</sup> On the concept of *ahaṅkāra* as ego-maker see Jakubczak (2008).

deemed to correspond to a state of pure consciousness or non-intentional consciousness.

I argue that as like in Sāṅkhya-Yoga, in Odissi too, mental states and processes are characterised by different degrees or forms of consciousness. I propose that these different forms of consciousness describe the different ways in which the mind is experienced as being in relation to the body. Consciousness is therefore the site of the experience of the self, as generated in relation to the specific body-mind compound of the individual.

In Odissi it is possible to identify four main forms of consciousness, that is to say four ways of experiencing body-mind relationships in the practice of dance. I define these forms of consciousness in terms of *pre-consciousness*, *self-consciousness*, *dis-consciousness* and *performative consciousness*. Although dancers do not use this terminology, the four categories here proposed are useful to explain how Odissi practitioners articulate their experience of body-mind relationships in dance. In the following section, I introduce these four categories, drawing on Legrand's (2007b) distinction between different forms of self-consciousness and elaborating her contribution in the light of the data on embodied experience in the practice of Odissi.

## 2. FORMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The experience of body-mind relationships in the practice of Odissi can be understood and explained in terms of different forms of consciousness. These different forms of consciousness do not correspond to discrete experiences but must be thought as categories that explain a range of similar experiences that stand in a continuum. This means that, although in their narratives dancers identify these experiences of body-mind relationships as distinct one from the other and attribute them clearly different values and meanings, an

examination of somatic experience reveals that the transition between these different forms of consciousness is highly blurred and, in fact, becomes an important issue in the practice of the dance.

In order to understand the four different forms of consciousness that I propose, it is useful to first take into account Legrand's (2007b) categories of self-consciousness. However, it is worth anticipating that Legrand's terminology, although illuminating, is not in itself sufficient to explain the range of somatic experience in Odissi and especially does not take into consideration body-mind relationships, which are crucial to the experience of this dance. However, the categories that Legrand identifies provide a good starting point for understanding embodied experience in Odissi.

Legrand suggests that any conscious act is always subjective and intentional. It is subjective in the sense that it always has a subject and as such it is necessarily subject-related. It is intentional, in the sense that it has an object and as such it is object-oriented.<sup>97</sup> While the subjectivity of the conscious act is paradigmatic, the object of the conscious act can be anything, including one's own self.

Legrand identifies four different forms of self-consciousness, depending on whether one's own self is experienced exclusively as the subject (self-as-subject) or also as the object (self-as-object) of the conscious act. The consciousness of the self-as-object can be pre-reflective or reflective, while the consciousness of the self-as-subject can be pre-reflexive or reflexive.

In order to explain reflective self-consciousness, Legrand writes:

Reflection is here simply defined as high-level cognitive states such as thinking about oneself, judging one's personality, scrutinising one's physical aspect, etc. When entertaining

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<sup>97</sup> According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy, a conscious act can be ideally unintentional and even non-subjective. In fact, Sāṅkhya-Yoga considers this non-object-directed and non-subject-related conscious act as the ideal conscious state or pure consciousness, which is associated with the state of mokṣa or liberation.



such states, one is able to spontaneously report the intentional object he is conscious of as being oneself. (578)

With respect to pre-reflective self-consciousness, Legrand argues that:

Pre-reflective states correspond to those states, which are sometimes described as minimally or elusively conscious. This is the case, for example, when the subject is conscious of being anxious without thematizing it enough to be able to articulate it in verbal reports. Nonetheless, he can have a retrospective access to it. (578)

LeGrand continues by explaining that:

Pre-reflective and reflective states of consciousness of oneself-as-object imply a scission of the self, between the observed self-as-object and the observing self-as-subject. (579)

Therefore, in pre-reflective and reflective self-consciousness the self is experienced as the object of consciousness, but while reflective states are spontaneously reported through words, pre-reflective states eschew verbalisation, although they can be accessed retrospectively and they can be partially verbalised. As I will show, this is an important aspect of embodied experience in Odissi.

More ambiguous are Legrand's categories of reflexive and pre-reflexive self-consciousness.

In fact, Legrand writes:

There are two ways of being conscious of oneself as subject. The first is reflexive in the sense that one is conscious of oneself-as-subject. The second is pre-reflexive in the sense that one is conscious of some intentional object as experienced by oneself-as-subject. [...]

Pre-reflexive self-consciousness structures any conscious experience. (579)

Therefore, pre-reflexive self-consciousness is e.g. 'conscious first-person perspective', while reflexive self-consciousness is e.g. 'consciousness of my left touching hand as it touches any object (e.g. my right hand)' (578).

Legrand also suggests that pre-reflexive consciousness can be considered a form of minimal consciousness of oneself as the subject of any experience. It is the consciousness of oneself as being-in-the-world. Legrand's classification suggests that reflexive states may include non-thematized or reported proprioception, that is to say awareness of the body when the body is not made explicit object of the subject's conscious act, but is nevertheless part of the subjective experience.

However, as anticipated, Legrand's categories do not clearly explain the extent to which reflexive and pre-reflective self-consciousness differ. In fact, if I am conscious of my left hand touching any object, I am objectifying, despite implicitly, part of my body and of myself, as I may do in pre-reflective self-consciousness. In addition, when I am pre-reflexively conscious of my action, I am also reflexively conscious of my body being involved in this action, because my body is always involved in a way or another in the action performed (unless I suffer from some psychophysical pathology). Therefore, pre-reflexive self-consciousness always implies reflexive self-consciousness. In short, the distinction between pre-reflexive and reflexive self-consciousness is as blurred as that between reflexive and pre-reflective self-consciousness. This suggests that these categories, although useful to understand embodied experience, do not correspond to clearly discrete experiences.

Finally, Legrand writes:

If the state under investigation is appropriately recognised as *non-conscious*, then one might investigate implicit, automatic self-relevant processes. (578)

Therefore, according to Legrand, non-conscious states are characterised by implicit automatism. However, I suggest that automatic self-relevant processes are not necessarily non-conscious, but rather they are characterised, at least in the practice of Odissi, by an experience of disengagement between body and mind. In addition, they can be reported.

I also suggest that Legrand's category of pre-reflexive self-consciousness, if considered a minimal form of self-consciousness paradigmatic of any conscious act, cannot fully explain the experience of the self in highly skilful performance, such as in dance or sport activities. I propose that there are several elements, which make this form of self-consciousness in skilful performance far from being minimal. First of all the aesthetic requirements and expectations, which clearly distinguish a skilful performance from an ordinary conscious act; secondly the attention the performer has to give to various elements in the performance, which are relatively unfamiliar and unpredictable, such as lighting, one's position on stage or music; last but not the least the fact that the performing subject is perfectly conscious of being not only the subject of the performative act, but also the object of someone else's, the audience's, experience. Therefore, the consciousness of the self-as-subject in skilful performance, as I will explain later in this chapter, is complicated by the consciousness of the self-as-object of someone else's conscious act.

Drawing on Legrand's categories, but developing them in order to explain the peculiarities of somatic experience in Odissi, I propose that the relationships between body and mind in dance can be understood and explained in terms of four forms of consciousness, which I call pre-consciousness, self-consciousness, dis-consciousness and performative consciousness.

Following Legrand, I suggest that these forms of consciousness depend on whether the self is experienced as the subject or the object of the action. However, because one is never solely the subject or solely the object of one's conscious act, it would be more appropriate to speak of the self being 'mainly' the subject or 'mainly' the object of the conscious act. I argue that embodied experience drastically changes whether the self is experienced as mainly the subject or mainly the object of the experience itself. In particular, as suggested by Legrand (2007b: 579), when one experiences oneself as the object of embodied

experience, one also experiences a scission between an observed self-as-object and an observer self-as-subject. I argue that, in the case of Odissi, this scission is normally articulated in terms of body-mind split, where the body is considered the object and the mind the subject of the conscious act. Whereas, when one experiences oneself as the subject of embodied experience, one experiences a sense of integration and unity between body and mind. However, as I said, these experiences are not discrete but stand as the extremes of an experiential continuum. Therefore, one never experiences the self exclusively as the subject or the object of the conscious act.

In Odissi, the distinction between the experience of the self-as-object and the self-as-subject is clearly reflected in training and in performance. In particular, I argue that in training one experiences oneself mainly as the object of the training, while in performance one experiences oneself mainly as the subject of the performance. In fact, one receives training from someone else and *gives* a performance for someone else. This different position in the interpersonal relationships and in the exchange of embodied knowledge that this relationship entails drastically changes embodied experience.

Certainly in training one is also and always the subject undergoing training. This experience acquires particular relevance during individual practice when the practitioner is expected to become her own master. Similarly, in performance one is also always the object of the audience's experience. These blurred conditions of the self generate different experiences of body-mind relationships and especially causes continuous shifts between different forms of consciousness. However, I suggest that certain experiences are associated with and valued or disvalued in relation to certain practices. In other words, certain experiences are inadequate for certain purposes but necessary for others. In order to explain how this happens I first need to provide a basic definition of the categories I propose.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will give more details of the characteristics of the experiences corresponding to the four forms of consciousness that I propose, of the terms dancers use to articulate them, of the practices that enable or hinder their occurrence and of the discourses that give culturally specific and shared meanings to these experiences. However, for the purpose of this section, which provides a conceptual framework to my argument, it suffices to clarify how body-mind relationships are experienced in each form of consciousness.

I suggest that in pre-consciousness the practitioner intuitively experiences body and mind as distinct, but she does not thematize them as such. This is because her attention is mainly directed outwards, with the purpose of grasping new dance material. Hence, although in pre-consciousness the dancer perceives a distinction between mental faculties and physical abilities, she does not explicitly experience a scission between body and mind. This scission characterises the experience of self-consciousness. In *self-consciousness*, the dancer thematizes her body and explicitly recognises it as the object of the training, while she identifies her mind as the subject of the training. This happens because the dancer's attention is mainly directed inwards, towards her own body, in order to develop the dance skills. Consequently, although grounded on similar premises, that is to say that mental faculties and physical abilities are distinct, by thematizing this distinction or not, pre-consciousness and self-consciousness give space to very different embodied experiences. In pre-consciousness one is the implicit object of one's conscious act, while in self-consciousness one is the explicit object of one's own conscious act.

It is clear that both the experience of pre-consciousness and of self-consciousness recall Legrand's categories of pre-reflective and reflective self-consciousness. Both experiences take the self as the object of the conscious act, although this consciousness can be explicit if it is immediately accessed and reported or implicit if it is accessed and reported only

retrospectively. However, I suggest that pre-consciousness also includes Legrand's reflexive self-consciousness, or the consciousness of one's self as the subject of the conscious act. I suggest that this experience can be identified with proprioception or the awareness of the body from within, without thematizing it or making it the explicit object of the conscious act. Both pre-consciousness and self-consciousness are considered pertinent to the practice of dance and, in particular, are encouraged in training, but discouraged in performance. In both cases the mind and the body are engaged in the same conscious act.

I define as dis-consciousness the experience of the mind as disengaged from the body, or more precisely from the action performed. This experience occurs when one does something while thinking about something else. I suggest that the conditions for the experience of dis-consciousness arise in the experience of self-consciousness. Both in self-consciousness and in dis-consciousness, one experiences a scission between the body and the mind, but in dis-consciousness this scission is normally considered not pertinent to the purposes of the practice. In fact, while in self-consciousness body and mind, though experienced as distinct, are engaged in the same conscious act, in dis-consciousness they are engaged in different acts. The body is experienced as moving automatically and the mind as wandering. Dis-consciousness may occur both in training and in performance and it is normally considered a failure and associated with a lack of mental focus and with automatic movement. However, in certain circumstances kinetic automatism acquires a positive value and is identified with 'spontaneity' and 'fluidity' of movement. I will discuss this point in more detail in the following pages.

Finally, I define as performative consciousness the state in which body and mind are experienced as integrated and forming a psychophysical unity. Both body and mind are exclusively engaged in the same conscious act. Performative consciousness is the optimal experience when performing for an audience. In this state the self is ideally experienced as

the subject of the action, although, as I said, this occurrence is complicated by the awareness of being the object of the audience's experience and by the possibility of dis-consciousness, that may occur at any point if one lacks concentration. It is clear, for the reasons enunciated above, that performative consciousness cannot be conflated with pre-reflexive or minimal self-consciousness as described by Legrand.

Summarising the points here exposed, in the practice of Odissi, the states of pre-consciousness and self-consciousness are encouraged and, in fact, characterise training. In particular, pre-consciousness occurs mainly in supervised training, while self-consciousness occurs mainly during individual practice when the practitioner is expected to become her own master and to relate to her body as the object of the training, assuming her mind as the subject of the training. Although it is admitted that one can become self-conscious in performance, this is considered a failure, because it is not pertinent to the performance's goals and eventually causes dis-consciousness. Dis-consciousness may occur both in training and in performance and it is normally considered a failure and imputed to a lack of concentration. Nevertheless, automatic movement, a characteristic of dis-consciousness, is pursued through the training and acquires a positive value when associated with 'spontaneity' and 'fluidity' of movement. Finally, performative consciousness ideally characterises performance for an audience. However, I have suggested that performative consciousness is very different from minimal pre-reflexive self-consciousness, because although in performance one hopes to experience oneself purely as the subject of the performative act, one is at the same time aware of being the object of someone else's experience. This tension between experiencing oneself at the same time as subject and as object makes performative consciousness difficult to achieve.

In the following sections, I examine the forms of consciousness or experiences of body-mind relationships in dance, by taking into account the practices that enable or hinder

them, the terms dancers use to articulate them and the discourses that give culturally specific and shared meanings to these experiences.

### 3. KNOWLEDGE THAT ESCHEWS WORDS

I have defined pre-consciousness as a state in which one perceives a distinction between body and mind, or more precisely between physical abilities and mental faculties. However, I have argued that this distinction is not thematized and therefore one does not experience a scission between a self-object and a self-subject of the conscious act.

I have suggested that the experience of the mind as distinct from the body is implicitly shaped by and articulated through the distinction between the ability to understand and the ability to do something, especially perceived during the first stages of the learning process. The learning process consists in understanding how to do something and thereafter in developing the skills, through regular practice. In fact, the entire training process in Odissi is organised around the belief that one can do something, only after she has understood what to do and how to do it, although it is admitted that this understanding can be articulated through words or eschew verbalisation altogether.<sup>98</sup>

Given the importance that dancers attribute to the faculty of understanding in order to execute the skills in a correct way, one intuitively perceives mental processes as having a priority over physical abilities at least in initiating the learning process. One also pre-consciously perceives the mind as able to 'instruct' the body in order to develop the dance skills.

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<sup>98</sup> This view of the learning process is clearly based on the idea that knowledge, or what needs to be learned, is outside the individual and must be acquired through a mechanism of absorption, although the potential for acquiring this knowledge pertains to one's own mind and therefore is a latent faculty of the individual.



I propose that the term pre-consciousness is useful to articulate the experience of body-mind relationships especially when one is engaged in learning and understanding new things. In this state, one's attention is directed towards what the teacher says or demonstrates. One is in a state of 'receiving' knowledge. The purpose is, so to speak, to bring 'inside' something that is conceived as being 'outside' one's body-mind. This is supported by the culturally specific idea that the teacher is the repository of embodied knowledge and that the student is able to receive the dance skills only by making her body and mind available to the guru's teaching. To learn the dance is to absorb the know-how or the science of the dance and, from there, to develop the skills.

It could be said that in the state of pre-consciousness one's focus moves from outwards to inwards. In fact, pre-consciousness is characterised by what guru Ratikant Mohapatra defined as inner concentration. In pre-consciousness, the body and the mind are both engaged in performing the same act, that is to say learning or acquiring the new dance material, through a process of absorption. Therefore, the experience of pre-consciousness corresponds to a state in which the mind is mainly occupied in grasping or understanding new information.

However, the analysis of embodied experience suggests that there are two different ways in which the mind may be engaged in acquiring dance material. These two ways of understanding differ in degree and form of articulation. In fact, it appears that when involved in learning something, dancers can articulate the content of this understanding through words, but also through mental images, aural perceptions, tactile sensations and kinaesthetic feelings. In other words, in the process of learning, dancers can generate instructions for themselves, which can be verbal as well as visual, aural, tactile and kinaesthetic.

I suggest that these different articulations give space to different embodied experiences, and especially to different ways of experiencing body-mind relationships in dance. In particular, when verbal instructions are produced during the learning process, one experiences a split between physical and mental faculties, by objectifying the body and subjectifying the mind. This experience characterises the state of self-consciousness, which I examine in more detail in the next section. When visual, aural, tactile and kinaesthetic 'images' are produced, one experiences a state of pre-consciousness, in which body and mind are only intuitively experienced as distinct, but are not thematized as such. This is the state of pre-consciousness, which I analyse in this section.

These two forms of understanding were well described to me by Carolina Prada, when she suggested that there are two very different ways of learning something. She defined these two ways in terms of 'watching with the mind' and 'watching with the eyes'. Carolina explained:

Sometimes you are looking to the teacher who is explaining something and you are saying 'ok, the right leg is starting, and then it is doing three steps to the left, and then I am moving my hand like this, and...oh! Her chin just went a little bit round'. That is 'watching with the mind'. But in this way you can only get the directions to tell to your body or to remember 'this is what I have to do, this first, this second, and so on'. But when you are learning abhinaya and when you are learning these small things about the style, you have just to let yourself watch and whatever you are watching, you cannot think, you have to just watch so much that, when you close your eyes, you can see exactly what she was doing. So you let that image come so much into you that you can play it again into your mind. And with that image, you can start to understand and process it a little bit with your body.

This interview excerpt is clearly rich and tells us several things about somatic experience in learning Odissi. The first important point that needs to be highlighted is that in both cases, body and mind are perceived as distinct components of the human being. However, while

in 'watching with the mind' one's teachers' and one's own bodies are thematized and therefore scrutinised and selectively observed, in 'watching with the eyes' one's body is experienced more as the medium through which knowledge is acquired, although also in this case dancers recognise that it is the mind that eventually has to 'understand' and 'instruct' the body. The mind is experienced as the subject of the understanding that the dance training requires, but in 'watching with the eyes' the body is not explicitly objectified, as happens in 'watching with the mind.'

However, the really relevant difference between 'watching with the mind' and 'watching with the eyes' is rather in the mechanisms of articulation that one carries out in order to understand the dance skills. In fact, to 'watch with the mind' is for Carolina to be able to articulate one's understanding or the content of the learning process through words, while to 'watch with the eyes' is to be able to create a mental image to be used, during individual practice, to develop the skills. An important point that Carolina is making in this respect is that the modality in which the process of learning is carried out depends on the actual skills one is working on. In other words, there are certain things that can, and perhaps must be verbally articulated, in order to be remembered, while there are others that eschew words, but nonetheless leave a vivid impression in the practitioners' somatic experience.

In Carolina's words, it is also clear that in both forms of learning, one's attention is directed outwards, towards what the teacher's is demonstrating, in order to grasp something or, in the case of 'watching with the eyes', in order to 'let something come into you'. Hence, the body-mind is experienced as the object of the learning process being engaged in 'receiving' information.

Carolina is clearly valuing the process of 'watching with the eyes' because through this one can access embodied information that is otherwise verbally elusive. In fact, dancers argue that most of the learning process consists in carefully observing, listening and feeling in

order to understand the aesthetics of the dance and the modalities in which this understanding can be translated into physical skills. For instance, Sonali Mishra said:

I think it is important to have a picture in your mind. Once you have that understanding... your body would follow what your mind... at least I find it in that way.

Like Carolina, Sonali too is suggesting that one generates and works through mental images in order to 'instruct' the body. Similarly dancers use attentive listening in order to understand music, or more precisely to understand how movement and sound have to match each other for the dance to be considered correct.

Dancers also learn to understand the positions, orientations and movements of their body, by monitoring it from within. They produce and work through kinesthetic sensations to gauge the correctness of their execution. For instance, Sonali said that she was able to understand if she was doing the movement correctly or not, by feeling certain pressure points on her body. Amanda Geroy said 'it is important to learn how to feel, so you should not get addicted to the mirror.' Therefore, dancers learn to monitor the appearance of their body from within, through somatic awareness, by learning 'what it feels like' to do a certain movement, as Sonali suggested. For dancers, this somatic awareness is very important in order to become independent from external supports, such as the mirror, and eventually the guru.

Observing, listening and feeling play an important role in the process of learning dance, although what is understood through these cognitive processes can often hardly be articulated through words. In fact, it eschews verbalisation. This form of understanding, acquired among others by 'watching with the eyes' rather than by 'watching with the mind,' articulates a form of bodily intelligence. It is the capacity of the mindful body to grasp information and to work through it. This form of understanding can be intended as the function of the mind experienced as embodied or of the body experienced as mindful. I

use the expressions ‘embodied mind’ and ‘mindful body’ interchangeably to convey that, in this form of understanding that eschews words, dancers do not explicitly experience a scission between body and mind, although they clearly sense a difference between mental faculties and physical abilities.

I also suggest that this form of understanding based on observation, listening and feeling can be further explained through the Sāṅkhya-Yoga concept of *manas*. In fact, as I said above, *manas* corresponds to all cognitive processes which are based on the senses and carried out with a minimum degree of consciousness. As such, in Sāṅkhya-Yoga they are considered the base of cognitive experience. Nevertheless, for dancers they are very important throughout the learning process. In fact, dancers are aware that only thanks to the mind’s faculty of grasping information through observation, listening and feeling, can one really acquire all the stylistic subtleties that characterise this dance form. These nuances in movement are, for dancers, what distinguishes a beginner from a mature practitioner.

In short, in this section I have argued that in the state of pre-consciousness, one intuitively experiences mental faculties and physical abilities as distinct, but one does not experience a scission between body and mind. This is mainly due to the fact that in this state the practitioner does not thematize one’s own body-mind, but directs her attention outwards, with the purpose of acquiring knowledge. I have taken into account the terms dancers use to articulate this experiences, in particular Carolina’s distinction between ‘watching with the eyes’ and ‘watching with the mind.’ I have also examined the practices that support this experience, in particular the transmission of embodied knowledge that eschews verbalisation and that therefore relies on the practitioner’s ability to observe, listen or feel and to generate accurate information from these cognitive mechanism. I have also mentioned the discourses that give meaning to this experience, valuing the body-to-body

transmission of dance knowledge from teacher to student, the importance of understanding before doing, and the reluctance towards using the mirror against the value attributed to the knowledge of the body from within. I have also suggested that while the Sāṅkhya-Yoga category of *manas* is helpful to understand the nature of pre-consciousness, it does not do justice to the importance of the knowledge acquired through the senses, that dancers consider valuable throughout their learning process. In the next section, I look at the experience I have defined as 'self-consciousness'.

#### 4. THE SUBJECT AND THE OBJECT OF THE DANCE

I have described self-consciousness as a state in which the practitioner experiences a scission between the self-as-object and the self-as-subject of the dance training, identifying the former with the body and the latter with the mind. Drawing on Legrand's description of reflective self-consciousness, I have suggested that this experience is spontaneously or readily accessed and reported through words. In this state one experiences the self as both the subject and the object of the conscious act.

In this section, I examine the practices that enable this experience, the terms dancers use to articulate it and the culturally specific discourses that give meaning and value to the experience of self-consciousness. Carolina Prada's felicitous expression of 'watching with the mind' provides a good starting point for my discussion and links it to the experience of pre-consciousness, examined in the previous section.

As I suggested above, what really distinguishes 'watching with the mind' from 'watching with the eyes' is the fact that the first form of learning and acquisition of knowledge can be easily accessed and articulated through words. In fact, Carolina's internal dialogue emerges as the training and the observation of the guru's demonstration is going on. Carolina

scrutinises her guru's and her own body, making it the object of her selective and analytic attention and verbally articulating the dance skills.

This practice of verbally articulating embodied knowledge is not unusual. In fact, as mentioned in Layer V and IV, an important part of the training is carried out through verbal instructions and comments given by the guru to the students in order to ensure a thorough transmission and an accurate execution of the skills. The tendency and almost preoccupation with putting embodied knowledge into words is reflected in the codification of the movement vocabulary, so that virtually any important dance gesture, stance or step is assigned a name.<sup>99</sup> This preoccupation can be explained through the value of accurately reproducing the dance material as taught by the guru, without significant space for improvisation or personal interpretation.

I suggest that the verbal articulation of embodied knowledge, which is an important aspect of the Odissi training, creates the conditions for experiencing a state of self-consciousness or a scission between a self-body-object and a self-mind-subject of the training. The performing body of the practitioner is made the object of attention. The guru provides verbal comments that 'describe' the student's skills and give her cues on how to improve them. Because the comments are given on an individual basis, the dancer recognises her body as distinctive and unique. However, this recognition is also a form of alienation. One recognises her own body through the words and the gaze of the other (Leder, 1990). The dancer experiences her body as an object that needs to be instructed and trained.

This experience of self-recognition that the training entails through the objectification of the dancing body can be understood through the Sāṅkhya-Yoga category of *ahaṅkāra*. As mentioned above, *ahaṅkāra* is the mental faculty by which one recognises one's body-mind

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<sup>99</sup> I say 'virtually' because, as mentioned several times in this work, for dancers what really makes Odissi look as it looks are all those nuances of the movement vocabulary, which are not codified and can only be acquired through body-to-body transmission.

as one's own, that is to say as unique and distinct from other selves. It is through this faculty that the sense of self emerges. Although Sāṅkhya-Yoga claims that this recognition is an ordinary component of the human mind, in the practice of Odissi, what emerges is a specific sense of self in relation to the dance and its aesthetic ideal. The practitioner recognises her particular body-mind by comparing it with the ideal dancing body-mind of Odissi, which is normally exemplified by the guru. This experience of self-recognition, in the practice of Odissi, corresponds to a split between a self-subject and a self-object. In this state of self-consciousness, the attention of the practitioner is directed towards the self and how this self can comply with the aesthetic rules of the dance form.

Although the experience of a scission between the body and the mind emerges already when training with the guru, I suggest that it takes place in particular during individual practice, when the student 'incorporates' the skills and amends them according to the corrections given by the teacher. In individual practice one is required to become one's own guru, by instructing her own body.

During individual practice the dancer relates to her body as another person would do, more as a 'living object' than as a 'living subject.' At the same time, because the training is mostly carried out without the support of a mirror, the dancer always looks at this 'object' from within and experiences it as the subject, as well as the object of the training.



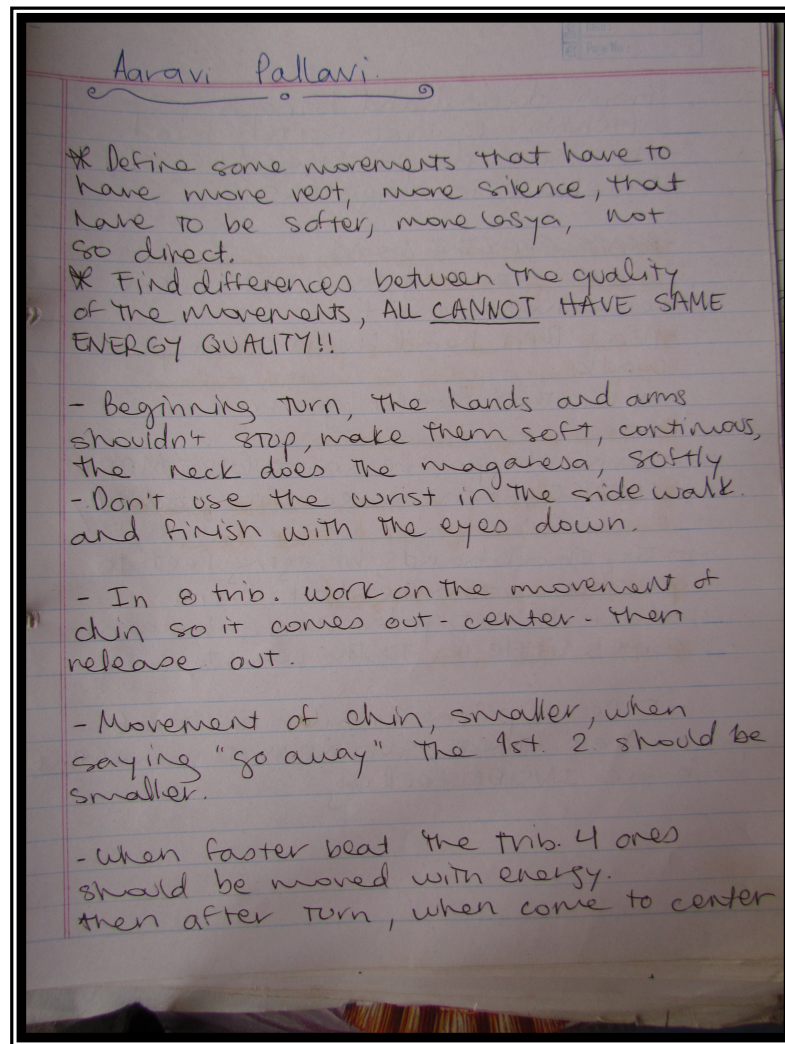


FIG. 18: WRITTEN FORMS OF SELF-INSTRUCTION (BY CAROLINA PRADA)

Especially during individual practice, the dancer experiences a tension between the 'lived body' and the 'objectified body'. She looks and treats her body as an object, while at the same time she lives through it and feels it as the subject of the training. It is in this tension that the experience of a scission between one's body and mind takes place. This split is exemplified by the dialogues that dancers entertain with themselves and, in particular, with their bodies. For instance, Carolina Prada said 'you have to start to talk with your muscles'. Amanda Geroy contended that she used the verbal instructions provided by her guru during supervised training to work with her body during individual practice. She explained:

Sometimes, if Sujata has given me certain corrections, I will work on a particular correction in the step. So her words can also be like my key.



**FIG. 19: TALKING TO ONE'S OWN BODY**

The objectification that characterises the experience of self-consciousness emerges also in the attempt to comply with the aesthetic ideal of the dancing body, and does not necessarily require the verbal articulation of embodied knowledge. For example, Moushumi Joshi said that she used to compare the image of her own body reflected in the mirror with the mental image of her guru's body that she had created during the training session. She explained:

What I try to do is to imagine what is that I saw in class, the way my teacher's body was moving, so I try to think...'when she did that, her body moved in that particular fashion' and I look at myself in the mirror and I see 'now am I doing like that or not?'

These words are a good example of how self-consciousness is linked to the experience of pre-consciousness. In fact, while I suggest that the experience of learning new material is characterised by pre-consciousness, the experience of applying this understanding in

individual practice is characterised by the objectification of one's body, something that I suggest can be explained through the term self-consciousness. In short, in pre-consciousness there already exist the conditions for the experience of self-consciousness. However, self-consciousness emerges especially during individual practice and, rather than concerning the relationship between student and guru, as in the case of pre-consciousness, it concerns one's relationship with one's own self, one's body and mind.

The experience of self-consciousness is not only related to the verbalisation of embodied knowledge exemplified by the instructions and corrections that the guru gives in order to improve the student's understanding of the dance aesthetics. Nor does self-consciousness emerge only in individual practice, when the dancer has to act and instruct herself as she was her own guru.

The experience of a scission between body and mind, in which the former is taken as the object and the latter as the subject of the conscious act, is supported by other practices and culturally specific values. In particular, it is encouraged by the importance given to self-discipline, which includes the capacity to endure physical discomfort.

Self-discipline is considered a basic value in the practice of Odissi and it is directly related to the capacity of doing individual practice and of doing it in a correct and efficacious way. To have self-discipline is, in the case of the dance, to practise and train regularly and accurately, without the guru's requesting and supervising the practice. Self-discipline is about becoming one's own master. Therefore, self-discipline and individual practice are almost synonyms. More precisely, self-discipline is considered the condition for doing individual practice and it is associated to one's mental faculties, rather than to one's bodily abilities. In fact, self-discipline is considered the result of one's mental power or will.

Dancers contend that without will power, one cannot do individual practice, and therefore one cannot progress in the training process. But mental power is especially important in the

way dancers deal with their body and its distress. In particular, without mental power one cannot overcome physical pain. It is believed that only by overcoming pain, can one really progress in the process of refinement of the dance skills. In fact, dancers say that until one has become able to 'resist' pain, one can certainly not enjoy dancing, where 'enjoyment' is the most important aesthetic value that regulates the practice of this dance.

The way dancers deal with the sensation of pain clearly shows that they experience a scission between body and mind, where the mind instructs the body and even controls its sensations. For instance, Carolina Prada said:

The legs are one of the first barriers that you experience in Odissi. First you have to be very much friendly with your legs, and tell them 'yes, yes, it hurts a lot, but come on, we can do it'.

These words clearly show that Carolina is relating to her own body as it was someone else's body. There is a sense of splitting within the self, where the body is objectified and talked to, encouraged and instructed. Similar experiences were reported by most of my informants. For instance, Deeksha Sharma explained that:

Sometimes your body is in a lot of pain, but it is more mental. If you psychologically say 'yes, I can do it,' then you will do it. Then you do not feel the pain. The pain is there in the initial stage when things are new for you. You have to get adjusted and accustomed to that. But when you get used, you just have to challenge your mind.

According to Deeksha, although the pain is a physical sensation, the experience of pain pertains to and can be controlled by the mind. Through mental power one can re-interpret and even re-direct this experience, controlling and therefore neutralising it and hence experiencing enjoyment.

Along similar lines, Priyambada Pattnaik said:

This square position [cauka] is not very easy to sit in. But that pain does not come into your mind, because you love dancing, so you just start enjoying it.

Following a shared belief, Priyambada correlates the ability to neutralise pain to the experience of enjoyment. Similarly, a Bharatanatyam dancer told me that her teacher used to say that only when pain ends, dance may begin, revealing that the capacity to neutralise physical pain and to experience enjoyment are two highly valued principles in these practices and are correlated in dancers' embodied experience.

Amanda Geroy used a very powerful image to describe how one should face the experience of pain in her daily practice, by saying:

This is another metaphor that I use with my students: the limitation, for example, of pain. Feeling pain in cauka. If every time you have pain, you stand up, it is never gonna go. The pain is like a wall: if you go to the wall and come back, go to the wall and come back, nothing is going to happen. But if you go to the wall and stay, just a little and scratch it, and next time you scratch it a little bit more, finally one day you will break through the wall, just by little scratches. But you have to do it. You have to make yourself. It is this inner strength you should develop.

Similarly, Sujata contended:

When my physique doesn't allow me to go ahead, I am strong mentally. So my mental strength pushes me so much.

Therefore, according to dancers, physical strength and skills can be developed only if one has mental power.

The capacity of the mind to control the body, through verbal instructions and through the exercise of will power, can be related and understood through the Sāṅkhya-Yoga category of buddhi. At this level, the mind is not only experienced as distinct from the body, but also

as acting upon the body, instructing it from within. It is a discriminating, volitional mind. However, as showed in the last section of Layer IV, and as argued throughout this chapter, many dancers similarly admitted that the dance training had affected their minds, for example by giving them more mental power and confidence as subjects. Therefore, it is arguable that not only does the mind 'make' the body, but the body also 'makes' the mind. Although in their discourses dancers tend to stress the importance of the role of the mind over the body, it is clear that in practice mind and body are rather experienced as able to affect and transform each other, and hence are both subject to change.

Summarising the points discussed in this section, I have suggested that the verbal articulation of embodied knowledge, the relevance of individual practice, the importance attributed to self-discipline and to the capacity to neutralise the sensation of pain, the need for complying with the aesthetic ideal of the dancing body are all practices which encourage the experience of self-consciousness. I have argued that this experience is characterised by a scission within the self, between an object of the training, identified with the body, and a subject of the training, identified with the mind. In the state of self-consciousness, one experiences the mind as able to instruct and control the body and to relate to it almost as it was someone else's body.

In self-consciousness, the practitioner's attention is directed inwards and it is considered pertinent to the aims of the dance. In fact, the experience of self-consciousness in training is supported by culturally shared meanings that give value to it, such as the importance of individual practice, self-discipline and the refinement of the dancing body in order to adjust to the aesthetic requirements of the style. I have suggested that this experience is coherent with the Sāṅkhya-Yoga view of the mind, and in particular with the mental faculties defined under the terms of *ahaṅkāra* and *buddhi*.

In the following section, I look at how the experiential split between body and mind, which is encouraged by certain practices and discourses for the purpose of training, can also generate the experience of dis-consciousness. I argue that dis-consciousness is characterised, like self-consciousness, by the experience of a scission in the self, between body and mind, but unlike self-consciousness, is not considered pertinent to the dance practice and hence is often described as a failure of the mind.

## 5. WANDERING THOUGHTS AND AUTOMATIC MOVEMENTS

I have defined dis-consciousness as the experience of disengagement of the mind from the body, which is considered non-pertinent to the practice of dance. The state of dis-consciousness occurs when one 'does' something while 'thinking' about something else and, in so doing, one experiences a scission between mind and body. The experience of disengagement of one's mind from one's body is associated with automatic or mechanic movement and non-pertinent thoughts. It is also associated to loss of memory and loss of concentration. In this section, I examine the practices and discourses that enable and give meaning to this experience, and the terms dancers use to articulate it.

I suggest that, as the experience of pre-consciousness creates the conditions for the experience of self-consciousness by distinguishing between mental faculties and physical abilities, so the practices that enable self-consciousness also provide the basis for experiencing a state of dis-consciousness. In fact, the conditions for the occurrence of dis-consciousness are generated in the self-consciousness that the training in Odissi encourages, by valuing individual practice, verbalisation of embodied knowledge, self-discipline and the capacity to neutralise physical sensations, such as pain. Simply put, dis-

consciousness is the negative effect of having cultivated the experience of the self as both the object and the subject of the training.

In addition to the cultivation of the experience of self-consciousness, the state of dis-consciousness is enabled by other culturally specific practices and discourses. In particular, I propose that automatic movement is encouraged or discouraged, valued or devalued depending on the context and purposes of its occurrence.

Automatic movement is encouraged in Odissi by the use of repetition as the basic element of the training. In fact, to practise in Odissi essentially means to repeat the same exercises, steps and choreographies over and over again, without variations, improvisations or personal interpretations. The purpose of this repetition is to incorporate the dance material in the body of the practitioner in order to 'naturalise' it, to achieve spontaneity of movement and full control over the skills. Dancers also argue that repetition allows one to go deeper into the movement or the dance compositions and to understand their meanings and subtleties more and more thoroughly.

Repetition allows the practitioner to develop the memory of the body, so that one does not have to think about something in order to do it, as dancers often put it. The need for the practice of repetition is mainly due to the complexity that characterises this movement vocabulary and to the fact that dancers are expected to reproduce the steps and the choreographies exactly as taught by the guru. Therefore, automatic movement is valued when associated to bodily memory.

Some dancers said during the interview that if they could not remember something, they would just stand up and dance or listen to the music and their body would automatically remember what to do and how, without thinking about it. They would often add that this bodily memory is reliable only if one has done a certain movement or choreography several times so that it has become part of her body. As discussed above, according to dancers, the



mind has a priority in initiating the learning process. The mind goes also faster than the body. Through practice and repetition, one trains her body and her mind to go at the same speed and on the same track, as dancers often put it.

However, repetition creates the conditions for the experience of dis-consciousness. This state seems to occur more with the mastery of the skills. For instance, Amanda Geroy said that she used the basic steps as a meditation 'because obviously you know what you are doing', and you do not have to think about that. However, she also added 'sometimes I am just thinking about something else and doing the body movement'. This suggests that dis-consciousness may occur with the mastery of the skills, when the body has learned how to do things automatically. The more confident is one in her skills, the easier it is for her mind to wander away.

The experience of dis-consciousness may occur both in individual practice and in performance and it is generally considered a failure and associated to a lack of concentration. It can also happen during supervised training when one is not able to 'connect', as guru Ratikant Mohapatra put it, her mind with her body by translating one's understanding into physical skills. However, this experience of disengagement is particularly devalued and discouraged in performance.

Dancers straightforwardly say that a performance fails if one fails to maintain both body and mind engaged in the same performative action. For example, Sharon Lowen argued:

When you come on stage, first of all you have to understand that anybody who is actually watching can read your mind. If you do not know that, then you are going to come out and you are not going to be honest.

Along similar lines, Amanda Geroy also explained:

On stage, if you lose your mental focus for a moment your audience is gone, and also you can get distracted by the lights and by the music, and you can forget the dance. [...] In abhinaya also, you can go through the motions, but if mentally you are not there, the audience is gone. When you watch a performance, you know the difference when someone is there or not there, even if they are technically good.

According to Amanda, lack of focus causes distraction and even loss of memory and is associated to the mechanical execution of the movements without 'presence' or the capacity to imbibe the gestures with the appropriate meanings. Her words also suggest that technical perfection, achieved through the repetition of movements and compositions, does not necessarily guarantee a good performance. The full presence of mind is a basic requirement.

Dancers say that in order to avoid this state of dis-consciousness one has to avoid 'blind practice,' and to practise 'consciously' or 'mentally,' which means to practise with full presence of mind. In order to train the mind to be concentrated on the action performed, dancers often do what they call 'mental practice,' which means to rehearse the dance compositions, with minimum physical movements of the body, for example by sitting on the floor, or by only going through the hand gestures rather than through the full body movements. In fact, although repetition is meant to enhance the body's memory, this is not considered sufficient, as in lack of focus or concentration, one may 'go blank.'

Sharon Lowen explained:

I believe absolutely in mental practice, and I have always done lots and lots of mental practice, whether it's when going to sleep, whether it's going through a sequence on a place, or whatever, When I've got my notes, I can just read-practise. [...] When I am looking at the text, I am just feeling myself inside, with minimum movement. I do not picture it. [...] I may use a finger, but it's like for the whole body. Your whole body reacts, and nobody really knows.

Sharon also told me that she preferred not to repeat the compositions too many times, as they would, according to her, lose their 'spontaneity' and they would rather look 'mechanical,' just a sequence of movements executed automatically. In fact, dancers associated the experience of dis-consciousness also to 'mechanic' movement.

To dance mechanically means for Odissi practitioners to dance without being fully present and engaged in the action performed. Dancers suggest that when a performer dances in this way, not only she will not enjoy, but also the audience will not enjoy the performance. One will not be able to feel and give *rasa* to the audience, where *rasa* is considered the ultimate aim of a performance. Therefore, dancers equate lack of concentration to lack of enjoyment and to lack of *rasa*, all elements that render a performance aesthetically inadequate.

In short, I argue that the repetition of exercises, steps and choreographies, which is a fundamental feature of Odissi training, contains a tension dancers have to deal with. On the one hand, repetition intensifies and naturalises bodily memory; on the other hand it enables a sense of automatism in the movements of the body. This automatism, which dancers sometimes frame in positive terms, associating it to the 'internalisation' of the dance material and to the spontaneity and fluidity of movement, encourages a disengagement of the mind from the body. This experience which I have defined as dis-consciousness is associated with a lack of concentration and performative presence, and it is believed to hinder the aesthetic quality of the performance, preventing the performer and the audience from enjoying and feeling *rasa*. This experience of dis-consciousness is also associated with the 'mechanic' execution of the dance compositions without mental involvement in what one is doing.

In the following section, I examine how dancers experience the state of body-mind oneness, which I have defined as performative consciousness. I will suggest that

performative consciousness is the optimal state in performance and assumes several culturally specific meanings, which I will discuss more in extent in the last chapter of this dissertation.

## 6. WHEN BODY AND MIND ARE ONE

Dancers identify the optimal performative state as one in which the performer experiences her body and mind as being one. I have defined this state of body-mind oneness as performative consciousness. Although dancers admit that the experience of performative consciousness may occur more easily when practicing or rehearsing, the state of body-mind oneness, which is truly valued, must take place when performing for an audience. In this section, I examine the practices that enable or hinder the occurrence of the experience of performative consciousness and the discourses that give meaning and value to it.

As the experience of pre-consciousness creates the conditions for the experience of self-consciousness, by establishing a distinction between mental faculties and physical abilities, and as self-consciousness creates the conditions for the experience of dis-consciousness, by encouraging the experience of the mind as able to instruct and control the body, in a similar way dancers describe performative consciousness in relation to and against embodied experience in training. In fact, dancers' narratives reveal the existence of a tension between somatic experience in training and somatic experience in performance. In other words, dancers experience or expect to experience in performance something that they do not normally experience in training.

I suggest that this tension between training and performance concerns the experience of body-mind relationships in dance. In fact, while during training one values the experience of the mind as distinct from the body and as able to instruct and control the body, in

performance one values the experience of the body and the mind as an integrated unity. Consequently, if the states of pre-consciousness and self-consciousness are encouraged and valued for the purpose of training, they are highly discouraged in performance.<sup>100</sup>

This tension concerning somatic experience in training and in performance was explained by Sonali Mishra when she argued that:

At least in classical dance, you want to be to the point that you are not thinking any more, because when you are in your learning process, you are constantly thinking, thinking, thinking to the point that you do not necessarily enjoy the dance, because you are always thinking about technique. Once you reach that point where you stop thinking, that is, I think, the point where you reach the divinity, where the mind and the body are actually one. And that for me, personally as a dancer, is a miracle.

Therefore, articulating a shared belief, Sonali is associating 'thinking' to training and 'non-thinking' to the optimal somatic state in performance. The terms 'thinking' and 'non-thinking' describe two clearly different ways of experiencing mental processes in relation to physical processes and hence of articulating body-mind relationships. To say that one is engaged in thinking is to experience one's mind as occupied in grasping and understanding information or in instructing and controlling the body. It is to experience the mind as characterised by an evaluative attitude. It is a mind that compares one's performance to the aesthetic ideal of the performing body. This is the state of the mind in pre-consciousness and self-consciousness.

To say that one has to stop thinking is to say that one has to experience one's mind as present to the body and to the action performed, without assuming an evaluating attitude.

To stop thinking clearly does not mean that one has to enter in an unconscious state or that

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<sup>100</sup> In this respect, Mullis (2008) has suggested that while during training a performer is expected to be highly conscious of her body, in order to develop and master the skills, the body has to eventually recede from consciousness, for a performance to be successful. Hence, while valued in training, self-consciousness hinders performance.

one's mind suddenly stops working. Dancers attribute the occurrence of this state of non-thinking to the capacity to concentrate or focus on the action performed. Non-thinking corresponds to the state that I have defined as performative consciousness.

Dancers use many terms to articulate this experience of body-mind oneness in performance. Sometimes they attribute spiritual and religious value to it, arguing that through performative consciousness they can reach and experience God or some form of divine power. Sometimes dancers describe this experience as extraordinary, a sort of miracle. In this state of body-mind oneness, they say they can forget their sense of self, their bodies and minds, their personal identity and, in so doing, they can become the dance or the character they are portraying. Dancers also associate the experience of body-mind oneness to aesthetic enjoyment for both the performer and the audience.

In general, this experience of performative consciousness corresponds to a sense of integration within the self and between the dancer and the dance, the music, the character, the audience and God. When one's body and mind are united, they go 'like gel' or 'in a track,' as dancers often put it. In this state of performative consciousness, the performer merges with the rest. In fact, this experience is also described in terms of self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness.<sup>101</sup> This experience clearly corresponds to the experience of 'flow' examined by Csikszentmihalyi (1991). In fact, as Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) have argued, the state of flow may occur in daily activities, but it is especially experienced in skilful performances such as dance or sport. When achieving a state of flow 'a person, totally absorbed, feels tremendous amounts of exhilaration, control, and enjoyment. In flow states people push their abilities to their boundaries and in so doing experience a merging of action and awareness'. (12)

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<sup>101</sup> See the following chapter (Layer I) for a more detailed discussion of the culturally specific meanings attributed to this experience of body-mind oneness.

However, the tension between somatic experience in training and somatic experience in performance is more accentuated in those practitioners who consider themselves students than it is in the narratives of those who are already senior performers and gurus. This is clearly because gurus and senior performers are not under training or they have already achieved control over the dance skills and therefore they do not have to 'think' as much as junior practitioners do, about 'how to do' things correctly. However, this also suggests that, with expertise, the experience of performative consciousness may occur more frequently both during daily practice and when performing for an audience, and therefore loses its extraordinary and miraculous character.

An examination of dancers' narratives reveals that there are several factors that enable or hinder the occurrence of the state of performative consciousness.<sup>102</sup> In fact, Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggest that for flow to occur three basic conditions have to be met by the subject and these are 'a challenge commensurate with one's skill, a clear goal combined with clear feedback, and the ability to concentrate on the task' (12). These factors also explain why the experience of body-mind oneness is more idealised in students' rather than in gurus' narratives. In fact, among the factors that enable performative consciousness there is certainly the full control over the dance skills, confidence and stage experience, a thorough knowledge and understanding of the dance material, as well as a position of power in the definition of the aesthetics of the dance. In fact, when a guru dances, his or her performance is considered correct by definition, because the guru is the repository of the aesthetics of the dance. The guru decides what is correct and what is not, whereas dance students have to fully comply with the instructions given by the teacher.

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<sup>102</sup> For an examination of the experience of flow in professional dancers' performance see Hefferon and Ollis (2006).

Dance students are more unlikely to achieve a state of body-mind oneness because they are still in their learning processes. Therefore, they still have to 'think' about what they are doing. By not having fully acquired the skills, they still experience, more often than not, a state of self-consciousness. Their mind is still often experienced as instructing, controlling and judging the body. Dance students are clearly less confident about their performance, and by definition they have less stage experience. In addition, they are not in the position of defining the aesthetics of the dance. Whatever they do differently from what they have been taught is considered a mistake.

In fact, one of the main reasons that hinder the occurrence of performative consciousness is the fact that one's performance has to fully comply with the aesthetic requirements of the style, which are normally set by the guru and in general by the dance community. This means that one's performance is judged not per se, but is always evaluated against a clear and shared aesthetic ideal. More importantly, the dance compositions that one learns and performs are set from the beginning to the end and known by the knowledgeable audience (*rasikas*). Therefore, any variation is immediately identified and questioned.

When dancers learn a composition, they are not taught, allowed or encouraged to improvise or to give a personal interpretation of what they are doing. One has to remember complex sequences of movements, exactly as taught by the guru, with no space, at least as a student, for variations, whether preconceived or extemporaneous. Variations to the set dance compositions are also complicated by the fact that movements and music are structurally linked and that, although the basic meter may remain regular throughout the piece, the musical composition can be quite varied in terms of rhythmic patterns and speed. In addition to this, the music compositions are normally based on a single *rāga*, which is repeated over and over again in the choreographic item, with small variations. Therefore, unless one perfectly knows the music compositions by heart, one cannot



improvise, as any mismatch between movement and music would be immediately identified as a mistake. Finally the items last an average of ten to twenty minutes and are normally performed as solos. Hence, a good performer is expected to have strong mnemonic skills and an enduring stage presence.

Last but not the least, performance is considered and experienced as an event that happens almost out of ordinary time and space. Unlike daily training, which is characterised by continuous interruptions, whether for a telephone call or the arrival of a visitor or the intermittent comments given by the guru at any moment of the training, performance is conceived as an extraordinary event, which must not be affected or interrupted by the affairs of ordinary life. For ten to twenty minutes the performer and the audience are expected to travel in time and space, to enter an extraordinary and 'perfect' reality where everything is executed without flaw. The performance proposes a perfect and ideal reality where the self, the mind and the body of the performer disappear from perception, by merging with the dance, where everything perfectly falls in its place, where all the elements come together to form a coherent and integrated whole. In fact, only in this state one's body and mind disappear and one is able to achieve self-transcendence or performative consciousness.

As already mentioned, dancers argue that the most important element for the occurrence of performative consciousness is concentration. Concentration is the capacity to 'connect' mind and body in the performance of the same conscious act. Concentration is important both in training and in performance, however it is experienced in very different ways. In fact, I suggest that this difference is due to the fact that in training one perceives oneself mainly as the object of the learning process, while in performance one perceives oneself mainly as the subject of the performative act.

In performance, one's mind is not engaged in grasping new material as in training, but in sharing with the audience what one already knows. The performer is in control of her conscious act. However, I have suggested that this experience is complicated by the awareness of being at the same time the object of someone else's, the audience's, experience. While the performer is expected not to judge her own performance, she also knows her performance is being judged by the audience against the aesthetic ideal of the dance. This awareness hampers the occurrence of performative consciousness, especially if the performer lacks confidence, experience, full control over the skills and, above all, concentration.

The experience of performative consciousness and its relationship with concentration, which dancers often draw, can be explained through the Sāṅkhya-Yoga concept of samādhi. In fact, as Shankman (2008) suggests, the concept of samādhi 'entails the unifying of the mind in a steady, undistracted awareness' (3). Shankman explains that there are two ways of intending samādhi. He says that some view samādhi:

as an exclusive focus on a single object, while others as a broader state of awareness in which the mind remains steady and unmoving, yet aware of a wide range of phenomena around the meditation object.

According to Shankman, this apparently subtle difference explains two different forms of concentration. In fact, the term *cittass' ekaggatā* is alternatively translated as 'one-pointedness of mind' and as 'unification of mind.' Shankman explains that:

A one-pointed mind rests firmly and steadily fixed on the object of its attention. [...] A unified mind is also settled and undistracted, although not necessarily firmly focused on a single point. [...] All its faculties are brought together and integrated, remaining settled, unwavering, and clearly aware as a wide range of changing experiences unfold. In this case the mind itself is unmoving, but not the flow of experience. (4)

It is arguable that a one-pointed mind is characterised by focused concentration, while a unified mind is characterised by non-intentional or non-object-oriented awareness (whether this object is oneself or anything else), what Sāṅkhya-Yoga defines as a state of 'pure consciousness'. According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, pure consciousness corresponds to self-transcendence, while focused concentration is a means to 'still' the mind, in order to be subsequently able to achieve a state of non-intentional awareness or pure consciousness. Therefore, the experience of 'one-pointed mind' is the precondition for the experience of a unified mind, which allows the experience of pure consciousness.

I suggest that dancers aim at experiencing non-intentional awareness, or a unified mind, and therefore self-transcendence, while it is clear that the performative practice is never strictly non-intentional, if only because there is always an intentional object to which the self relates, and this minimal intentional object is the dance or the performative action itself.

The concentration that one is ideally able to achieve in performance can be understood as 'one-pointedness of mind', rather than as 'unification of mind'. This form of concentration, or focus, is a means to the experience of self-transcendence, intended as the 'unification of mind'. In other words, although dancers aspire at experiencing 'unification of mind', the concentration that they are actually able to achieve in performance is a one-pointed concentration. Performative consciousness is therefore a form of one-pointed concentration, rather than a non-intentional awareness, although dancers aspire to experience it as such. However, the fact that performers have to be aware of many other components of the performance, apart from the performative action itself (in particular they have to be attentive to the accompanying music, the lighting, their position on stage, the presence of the audience), jeopardises their one-pointed concentration.

Although performative consciousness corresponds more to a state of one-pointed mind than to a state of unified mind, dancers report it as an experience of self-transcendence. Paradoxically, this sense of self-transcendence is determined by the acquisition of a sense of enhanced subjectivity in the action performed. In fact, while in training one experiences oneself mainly as being the object of the learning process, in performance one experiences oneself mainly as the subject in charge of the action performed. In other words, self-transcendence is achieved when one's body and mind, that is to say what makes an individual distinct and unique, pass into the background of awareness. One experiences self-transcendence by experiencing oneself as the subject of the action performed, although one forgets the individual character of one's own body and mind.

In short, in this section I have taken into account the terms dancers use to articulate the experience that I define as performative consciousness and the culturally specific practices and discourses that enable or hinder the occurrence of this experience. In particular, I have emphasised the importance of concentration, confidence, control over the dance skills and stage experience for achieving this experience. I have also examined those elements that hinder or jeopardise this state of concentration that performative consciousness entails. Among these, I have highlighted the aesthetic pressure put on the performers who have to comply with well-defined and shared principles of correctness and whose training does not leave space for improvisation or subjective interpretation. I have suggested that this is legitimised by the value attributed to the accurate preservation and reproduction of the dance movement and choreographic vocabulary exactly as defined by the choreographer, in order to maintain the 'purity' of the style. In the last section of this chapter, I take into account the role that music plays in dancers' somatic experience and narratives with respect to body-mind relationships. Therefore, I examine how music enables or hinders the experiences of pre-consciousness, self-consciousness, dis-consciousness and performative consciousness examined so far.

## 7. THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN DANCE

Dancers' narratives on embodied experience reveal that music and listening play a crucial role in defining body-mind relationships. In fact, dancers generally argue that music has the power to facilitate the 'connection' between body and mind. Thus, music and attentive listening are especially important in the states of pre-consciousness and performative consciousness, when body and mind are experienced as being engaged in performing the same action. Consequently, lack of attentive listening is associated with dis-consciousness. Therefore, according to dancers, music and listening enables the engagement of body and mind in the performance of the same action.

In this section, I look at how dancers experience music in their body and in relation to movement. It is worth highlighting that dancers do not have a technical knowledge or understanding of music. In fact, most dancers do not normally undergo musical training. Although the gurus who systematised Odissi during the revival in the '50s were also drum players, and still nowadays male students are encouraged to learn the pakhavāj, there is a general distinction between musicians and dancers. I suggest that this distinction has more than an aesthetic explanation. In fact, I contend that it establishes a sense of dependency of dance on music and consequently of dancers on musicians. This sense of dependency, which I have examined in a slightly different light in Layer IV, affects practitioners' embodied experience, as the content of this section will show.

In fact, dancers argue that music facilitates the process of acquiring, memorising, recalling and creating new kinetic information. Music also helps the practitioner attribute 'meaning', 'emotion' and 'quality' to the movements and gestures of the dance. But above all, according to dancers, music facilitates the achievement of focus and concentration and

hence of the experience of self-forgetfulness, that the state of performative consciousness entails.<sup>103</sup>

In general, in their narratives dancers tend to emphasise the role of music and listening in both the learning process and in performance, and to consider movement as dependent on music. However, an examination of embodied experience reveals that, in arguing for the predominance of music and listening over dance and movement, dancers are reiterating culturally specific values and meanings that concern relations of power between dancers and musicians, and more generally between women and men.

Odissi dancers often argue that the human mind is 'naturally' more inclined to perceive, understand and remember music, rather than movement. They share the belief that, thanks to music, body and mind are more promptly connected and experienced as being one. Guru Ratikant Mohapatra for instance argued that 'human beings' mind is much more tilted to music'. Similarly Ileana Citaristi said 'somehow the music remains in the mind more than the dance'. Along similar lines, Sonali Mishra contended 'I think music is really what captivates people'. And Kavita Dwibedi argued 'music does affect your [*she touches her forehead*] because the first thing that you are listening is music, which touches you here [*she touches the centre of her chest*], inside'. Finally, Sujata Mohapatra asserted 'music is the soul of dance'.

Therefore, for Odissi dancers it is mostly inconceivable to dance without music accompaniment, in spite of the fact that their dancing body is used musically, especially through the creation of rhythmic patterns with the footwork. Dancers contend that, without music, movements would be largely meaningless, mechanical and difficult to recall

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<sup>103</sup> Clarke and Kini (2011) have discussed the relationship between the performance of *dhrupad ālāp*, the most ancient form of Hindustani classical music, and the experience of deep states of consciousness. They have also shown that these experiences are coterminous with traditional Hindu philosophical concepts, such as those of Sāṅkhya-Yoga, examined in this dissertation.

and to follow for both the performer and the audience. For dancers, music is really what makes movement enjoyable.

Odissi dancers argue that music plays an especially important role during the learning process. In fact, they assert that music and listening facilitate the ‘understanding’ of kinetic material. This happens on two different levels, a more explicit one that concerns the rhythmic footwork, and a more implicit one that concerns the quality of the movements of the upper body. In fact, while the movements of the feet are clearly associated with the rhythmic patterns played by pakhāvaj player, the movements of the torso and upper limbs are associated with the way the vocalist articulates the rāga.

Therefore, dancers assert that, when learning a dance composition, they focus on the rhythmic patterns played by the drummer in order to memorise the sequence of steps, while they focus on the rāga in order to understand how the movements of the upper body have to be executed, by extending or elongating the limbs. This connection on the one hand between footwork and percussive instrument, and on the other between torso and arm movements and rāga was articulated by Amanda Geroy, when she explained:

The percussion obviously is related to the footwork. So hearing the particular way that the percussion is being played makes you remember what the feet are supposed to do.

And she continued:

Sometimes the rāga makes you feel that you should do the movement very softly and take the whole time, the whole span of the movement, this heavy and elongated sense in the movement. Some music would make you want to do the movement and hold it there, because it just feels that this is required.

Often the way movements are executed is pre-established in the dance compositions, and hence for dancers is mainly a matter of ‘feeling’ the rāga through their movements. Kavita

Dwibedi, explaining how she used to teach her students to relate their movements to the music, said:

You feel the music first. If you feel the music, the movement will accordingly follow, and it will be complete. [...] If I do not feel the music accordingly, my movements will not work.

As Kavita's words show, for dancers it is the movement that has to follow the music and not vice versa. However, these words also reveal that dancers do not simply listen to the music, but feel it through their moving body. Therefore, although in their narratives, dancers seem to give predominance to music and listening, a more careful analysis of their embodied experience reveals that they perceive music through their moving body and therefore they feel rather than listen to it.

In fact, from the first class, dancers learn to conceive and experience their movements as sonic-kinetic units, hence units of structured movement and sound. Dancers learn that each dance movement has a precise duration and this duration has a corresponding sound. This sound is normally made audible through the percussive use of the footwork. Even when the feet do not produce a clearly audible sound, the musical duration of the movement is expressed through onomatopoeic syllables that reproduce the rhythmic patterns played by the pakhāvaj player. Sometimes the sonic quality of the movement corresponds to the enunciation of a word. In fact, while in pure dance, dancers focus on matching their movements with the rhythmic patterns and the rāga sung by the vocalist, in pantomimic dance they focus on coordinating their gestures with the lyrics of the text that provides the score to the composition.

Both when learning new dance material and when practicing items already known, dancers often accompany their movements with singing, especially in absence of the musicians or of the recorded track. Dancers believe that singing, and therefore music, facilitates the



acquisition, memorisation and retrieval of dance material. In this respect, Amanda suggested:

If I heard the music a lot of times, then I can learn the dance really fast, while the dances that I haven't learned the music for, and that I do not know the music, then it takes me a lot longer to learn the dance.

Therefore, according to dancers, music provides a sort of mental structure through which to grasp, learn and organise kinetic material.

Along similar lines, Ileana Citaristi suggested:

There are certain cases in which you remember the music but you do not remember the dance. I do not know if that has to do with musical memory, which goes deeper.

Thus, for dancers, music not only facilitates the acquisition of new dance material, but also its retention in memory and its later recovery. In this respect, guru Ratikant for instance explained:

Sometimes you remember the music and then automatically you remember the movement, and sometimes if it is technical, then you have to think about the rhythm.

In fact, dancers often use the term music to refer to the *rāga*. It is worth noticing that dancers associate the memory of certain movements with the rhythm or *tāla*, while the memory of other movements with the *rāga*. This depends on whether the emphasis of a particular sonic-kinetic unit is given to the complexity of the rhythmic patterns created by the footwork, or on the kinetic or emotional quality of the movements of the upper body. In fact, in pantomimic items, dancers would recall the lyrics, while in pure dance items they would recall the *tāla* or the *rāga* depending on whether the movement is more rhythmic or more lyrical. To be precise, all movements are related to both *tāla* and *rāga*, however, it is clear that in some of them the emphasis is on the rhythmic footwork, which normally

becomes particularly complex and fast, while in others the emphasis and the attention of the dancer is placed more on the movements of the upper body and on how they are executed in full congruity with the way the rāga is sung.

In short, music is not only related to the understanding of movement, in the sense of how it needs to be executed, but it is also associated with bodily memory. In fact, through music, one is able to incorporate the movements in a more rigorous, thorough and 'correct' way. All this suggests that music enables the state of pre-consciousness, when body and mind are experienced as distinct and yet related and engaged in the same activity.

Dancers also contend that music plays a crucial role in the creation of new movement or choreographic material. While it may happen that choreographers are given music to choreograph to, most of the dance compositions are created jointly with the corresponding music compositions. However, choreographers argue that, although they may have an idea of the movements they want to employ in the dance composition, they do not choreograph unless they have at least a draft of the music. For this purpose, they consult music composers and work with them in order to find the music appropriate to the movements and concept they have in mind.

Ileana Citaristi explained this process in detail, by saying:

When I compose, normally first I select the topic, I get somebody to write on the topic or I find the text. Then, I sit with the musicians. Whatever composition I am going to do, I have to sit with the musicians for the music composition. I direct them. Direct means either I accept what they propose to me or not. I do not have the dance in my head. So, the dance comes always later. Something tells me that not, that the music should be different, even if the movement is not in my head. So only after the music composition is over, then with the draft-recorded version that I have, I start the composition, either is a group or solo or duet and I hardly change anything. Usually whatever music has been developed in that phase it is

hardly to be modified. It is very strange how although you have the structure already in your head of what you would like to develop in the composition... but I do not attempt any movement while I am sitting with the musicians. But when I compose the movements come up very quickly and easily according to the music. The music comes first except for very few items, in which I started without the music and with the counting.

While dancers admit that they intuitively know what kind of music they want to choreograph to, they also insist in arguing that they cannot start to compose movement unless they have already obtained a musical score from the musicians. Therefore, dancers tend to consider dance and movement composition as subsequent to and dependent on music composition. However, the fact itself that choreographers know which music is suitable to their concept and are able to 'direct', as Ileana put it, the musicians suggests that music is 'felt' and 'selected' through the dancing body.

Dancers argue that, apart from facilitating the acquisition, memorisation and recalling of movement material and from enabling the creative process, music is also important for achieving concentration when performing. Sonali Mishra for example explained:

In Odissi items, we have a short ālāp before the dancer actually enters the stage. I think the ālāp allows the audience, allows the opportunity to draw the audience, to join the audience and allows the dancer the opportunity to focus. [...] I think what happen when you get on stage [...], you are thinking about the audience, it is all these little funny things that enter in your head. But you have to come just to the point where you have to completely become One, to really feel the music and to allow just the dance to take over, and not your mind.

According to Sonali, by listening to the music, the mind does not 'take over', which means that it is not experienced as disengaged from the body or as controlling and directing the body. Therefore, music allows the body and the mind to become one. Similarly, Amanda said 'I focus on the hearing in order not to forget the dance'.

Therefore, according to dancers, music 'connects' the mind with the body and allows the dancer to experience a sense of unity in the self, and consequently a sense of identification with the dance and the audience. This connective function that music has enables both the experience of pre-consciousness, facilitating the grasping, understanding and memorisation of kinetic material, and the experience of performative consciousness, facilitating the achievement of a sustained concentration and a sense of symbiosis with the action performed and the audience.

However, the emphasis that dancers place, in their narratives, on the preponderance of music over movement, by saying for example that dance without music would be 'too jarring' (Ratikant Mohapatra, interview) and eventually not enjoyable, or that dancers have to follow the music and have to adjust to the speed given by the musician, must be reconsidered in light of certain values that regulate the relationships between dance and music and, by extension, between dancers and musicians.

In this respect, it is worth noticing that generally musicians are men. This is especially true for the drum player who is normally considered the one who provides the most undisputed base for the dance performance. In fact, the pakhāvaj player is the one who decides the time, the rhythm and speed of the performance, and hence the footwork of the dancer. However, although also the other musicians are normally men and dancers are more often than not women, there are several vocalists that are women and several dancers who are men. Therefore, for making my argument, I take into account what I have observed as being the most common and usual case.

By training and by sharing the discourses that underpin the practice of Odissi, dancers learn to consider dance as dependent on music and, by extension, dancers as dependents on musicians. This dependency may recall the way the movements of the upper body are conceived and experienced in the basic movement vocabulary of the dance, as well as the

way the rāga is conceived in relation to the tāla, where the tāla is taken to provide the structure of the music and the rāga to 'fill' this structure with its sonic ornamentations.<sup>104</sup> A more careful analysis of dancers' narratives and embodied experience suggests that the relationship between movement and music cannot be simply described in terms of dependency.

In fact, I argue that dancers are themselves musicians, in that they make music through their bodies and as such they have the potential to 'control' and 'lead' the musicians. This is particularly true in the case of performing with live musicians rather than to recorded music. In fact, it is arguable that the preoccupation for adjusting the movement to the music, rather than vice versa, is in part due to the use of recorded music during public performances. In addition, it cannot pass unnoticed that the first gurus who defined the dance movement and basic choreographic vocabulary were themselves both drum players and choreographers. Therefore, they were both dancers and musicians.

If training insists on the fact that dancers have to 'follow' the music, performance with live music provides space for the dancer to 'control' her accompanists. This is done for example by slightly increasing or decreasing the speed of the movements, 'forcing' the musicians to adjust to the pace set by the dancer. However, the control that a dancer has over her own performance on stage depends very much on who she is and how much power she has over the musicians. Hence, these relations of power are defined by gender, age, but also by the prestige and in part by the character of the individual artists.

Dancers are aware that the success of a performance, when done with live music, depends on the collaboration of the musicians. They define this collaboration in terms of 'connectivity'. In other words, dancers argue that musicians must 'connect' with the dancer

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<sup>104</sup> In Indian classical music tāla is normally defined as the father and rāga as the mother, reproducing through music a relationship between genders and social roles. See e.g. Rowell (1992: 298).

as much as dancers must 'connect' with the music. This was well articulated by Kavita when she said:

it is not just that I am dancing and they are playing. It is the connectivity. They have also to equally *feel* the dance. They cannot sing just for sake of singing.

Finally, the case of the creation of new movement material also shows that choreographers have already in their mind an idea or feeling of the movement they want to develop and they search in the music composition a structure that responds to what they intuitively already want. Although they do not attempt choreographing any movement before having the musical score, it is clear that they are able to subtly 'control' the musicians' creative proposals by exercising their veto.

In short, in this section, I have examined the role that dancers attribute to music with respect to body-mind relationships. I have suggested, following dancers' somatic narratives, that music helps the body and the mind become one, enabling concentration and hence the states of pre-consciousness and performative consciousness. In particular, music perception facilitates the acquisition, understanding, memorisation, recall and creation of movement material.

I have discussed how and why dancers tend to emphasise the importance of music perception and to conceive movement as dependent on music. However, I have also highlighted that dancers perceive music through their bodies, and always in relation to movement. In fact, they 'feel' rather than 'listen to' the music. I have also argued that a more careful examination of their discourses reveals that they articulate on the aesthetic and cognitive level relationships of power between dancers and musicians, where dancers are deemed to depend on musicians. In this respect, I have suggested that some dancers are able to 'control' and 'direct' musicians, although they often do so in subtle ways.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Odissi dancers' narratives reveal that there are three main ways in which one may experience and articulate body-mind relationships. The first way in which the mind relates to the body is through the faculty of understanding. I have defined this experience as a state of pre-consciousness and suggested that this state characterises the training process. The mind is here conceived as a form of embodied intelligence. The second way in which mental states relate to physical states is by instructing and controlling the body and its sensations. Here the mind is conceived as the agent acting over the body-object. I have defined this state as self-consciousness. In the third case, the mind is experienced as being fully present to the body, when this is engaged in performing a certain action. I have defined this state as performative consciousness. I have also suggested that sometimes dancers experience their mind as not being present to the action performed and therefore to the body itself and I have defined this last state in terms of dis-consciousness.

Throughout the chapter, I have suggested that these states of consciousness are valued in relation to certain goals but discouraged in relation to others. Therefore, there are practices that enable and practices that hinder the occurrence of these different forms of consciousness or experience of body-mind relationships, as well as there are different discourses that give meaning to their occurrence. In other words, the experience of body-mind relationships depends on the dance aesthetics and techniques of transmission.

Finally, I have contended that dancers attribute an important role to music both in training and in performance. In fact, music is deemed to facilitate the 'connection' between body and mind. However, I have discussed how the dependency of movement on music that dancers adamantly argue must be reinterpreted in light of discourses of power that concern the relationships between dancers and musicians.

## LAYER I: *SELVES*

### OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter, I examine how Odissi practitioners experience their sense of self in relation to the practice of dance and how this experience is shaped by cultural values and meanings. I argue that dancers conceive their artistic endeavour as a process of psychophysical cultivation, whose accomplishment consists in achieving an optimal experience of the self. In other words, dance training is a process of self-refinement deemed to eventually enable an experience of self-transcendence in performance.

Dancers attribute spiritual meanings both to the process of self-refinement that training entails and to the experience of self-transcendence that ideally takes place in performance. I suggest this happens because both the dance vocabulary and the dance practices are informed by culturally specific spiritual values. These values are normally associated to the Hindu devotional movement known as Bhakti.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to examine how dancers experience and articulate the process of psychophysical cultivation in training and the sense of self-transcendence in performance. I also discuss how the process of self-refinement and the experience of self-transcendence are informed by culturally specific categories that pertain to the bhakti spiritual philosophy. In particular, I take into account the values of self-surrendering,



practice, self-refinement and the experience of self-transcendence. Therefore, I show how aesthetic accomplishment and spiritual fulfilment overlap in dancers' somatic narratives.

## 1. SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

When I carried out this research I was not directly concerned with the spiritual meanings Odissi practitioners would attribute to their embodied experience and in fact I did not explicitly address this topic during the interviews. However, throughout the research process I realised that, by investigating dancers' embodied experience, I was also indirectly tackling the experience of one's sense of self in relation to the practice of dance. An analysis of dancers' somatic narratives showed that practitioners often conceived their artistic endeavour as a process of perfecting their body, mind and self. This process, whose accomplishment consisted in achieving an extraordinary experience in performance, seemed to be regulated by precise aesthetic and moral values. I realised that both the process of self-refinement that training entailed, and the extraordinary experience that performance made possible acquired spiritual connotations in dancers' narratives. In fact, they were often associated with a sense of the sacred and the extraordinary.

Hill *et al.* (2000) suggest that what makes a practice spiritual or religious is the fact that it attempts to deal with the sense of the sacred. They write:

The Sacred is a person, an object, a principle or a concept that transcends the self. Though the sacred may be found within the self, it has perceived value independent of the self. Perceptions of the Sacred invoke feelings of respect, reverence, devotion and may, ideally, serve an integrative function in human personality. (64)

According to Hill *et al.* (2000), what distinguishes religion from spirituality is the fact that the former is characterised by institutionalised mechanisms and rituals, while the latter is a

more personal and individual attempt to deal with the sense of sacred (64). Spirituality and religion do not necessarily appear together, although the use of the term spirituality 'apart from religion has a surprisingly short story' (Hill *et al.*: 57).<sup>105</sup>

Similarly, in the practice of Odissi the term spiritual attributed to the process of aesthetic self-refinement that training entails and to the experience of the self in performance cannot be fully understood unless inscribed within a specific cultural and religious horizon of meanings. In other words, the spirituality that Odissi practice supports is a very specific and regulated kind of spirituality. It is regulated to the point that, although it concerns the individual's relationship with the sacred, in its social aspects it may almost be considered a form of religious behaviour, whose mechanisms for dealing with the sacred are collective, institutionalised and embodied.

In the specific case of dance, I take the term 'religious' to indicate values and beliefs, discourses and institutionalised practices, and the term 'spiritual' to indicate how these values, beliefs, discourses and practices enter into and shape the life of the practitioners. In Odissi the religious elements are more explicitly and directly represented in the dance vocabulary, in the form of Hindu categories, while the spiritual elements are absorbed in a subtler way, and concern the way dancers live through religious values and categories, and how they define their sense of self in relation to dance. In this chapter, I show why and how dancers attribute a spiritual value to their artistic practice.

A few scholars (Apffel-Marglin, 1990; Lopez y Royo, 2007; Roy, 2009) have criticised the emphasis that modern narratives place on the ritual and religious character of Odissi dance, often validated through the reference to the *māhāris'* temple service. In this regard, Lopez y Royo (2007) has argued:

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<sup>105</sup> See also van der Veer (2009).

It is the overemphasis on its ancient ritual value that distorts contemporary Odissi performance practice. Yet this distortion also continues the mystique and appeal of contemporary Odissi. The overemphasis on the ritual embraces the sacred, the extraordinary, and the exotic, as the domain of the ritual, seen through Western eyes, and turns Odissi into an alluring and mysterious art, situated in ancient Orissan temples, through a myth sustained by archaeological narratives. (158-9)

And she continues:

Odissi is seen first and foremost as a banned temple ritual. This is central to its mystique, and it contributes to the way Odissi has been marketed on the urban and international performance circuit. (163)

Therefore, according to Lopez y Royo, among others, the reference to temple rituals, and consequently to religious behaviours, is instrumental to the needs of the contemporary performing arts market and is used to promote the dance on the urban and global stage. Lopez y Royo also suggests that, in these narratives, the domain of the ritual embraces the 'sacred', the 'extraordinary', and the 'exotic', seen through western eyes.

The rhetoric of the ancient temple ritual certainly plays an important role in marketing Odissi, enhancing its exoticism in the fantasy of the western audiences, while validating its sensual aesthetics with an aura of respectability and spirituality acceptable to Indian audiences. However, by changing point of view, one can achieve a more complete and complex picture of the rhetoric that underpins the practice of Odissi nowadays. In particular, I suggest shifting the perspective of analysis from that of the audience to that of the practitioners. In other words, in order to more fully understand the discourses about the ritual value of Odissi, one has to take also into account dancers' subjective experiences, and not only audiences' perceptions. In addition, one has to situate and interpret these subjective experiences within the cultural framework in which they are produced and within which they are supported. Therefore, if

dancers attribute a sacred, spiritual, religious and extraordinary value to their artistic endeavour, it is necessary to pay attention to what these categories mean to them and how these categories are shaped by cultural values, practices and discourses.

It is worth clarifying that I am not suggesting all dancers explicitly conceive their involvement in the practice of Odissi necessarily as a spiritual or religious endeavour, although some of them certainly do so. What I am arguing is that spiritual experience is defined in Odissi within a specific religious framework, and therefore it is necessary to understand how religious and spiritual categories and behaviours define each other. Odissi practice is inherently structured as a spiritual practice because of the values that underpin it, because of the way training is carried out and because of the discourses embedded in the practice itself. In particular, I argue that Odissi is structured as a devotional practice informed by the values that underpin the bhakti movement. In order to develop my argument, in the following section I introduce the main features of this devotional movement, focusing in particular on the overlap between aesthetics and spirituality that characterises it, as well as Odissi practices and discourses.

## 2. BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND SPIRITUALITY

Dancers often emphasise the devotional character of Odissi dance. For example, my informant Carolina Prada, explaining why she chose to train in this dance style, said ‘this surrendering just got me a lot... this being in love with devotion.’ Dancers normally explain the devotional character of Odissi through the reference to Lord Jagannātha, often defined as the presiding deity of Odissi.<sup>106</sup> However, dancers attribute a spiritual value to this

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<sup>106</sup> The figure of Lord Jagannātha is part of the aura of mysticism, which has promoted Odissi on the urban stage. However, as Lopez y Royo (2007) also reminds us, the religious icon of Lord Jagannātha, alongside Odissi dance, is intrinsic to Odia nationalism and therefore it comes as little surprise to find them so closely associated to one another in dancers’ narratives.

dance, because a feeling of devotion and a sense of the sacred and extraordinary imbue the dance vocabulary and practice. In particular, it is arguable that this feeling of devotion is informed by the values that underpin the religious movement known as Bhakti.

As mentioned above, although the devotee's favourite god or goddess can be any Hindu deity, the medieval development of the bhakti movement is mainly related to the cult of Lord Viṣṇu. As a devotional movement having as object of cult Lord Viṣṇu, the bhakti movement took the name of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava and it was associated to the figure of the saint Caitanya (b. 1486 C.E.). Haberman (2001: 30) has noted that, despite being very influential, Caitanya did not write his doctrine but asked some of his disciples to do so. These disciples were later known as the Six Gosvāmins of Vrindavana. Among these six theologians, particularly relevant was Rūpa Gosvāmin, whose doctrine has been examined by Haberman (1985, 2001). Rūpa used the rasa theory delineated by Bharata Muni in the Nāṭyaśāstra in order to set the theoretical and practical foundations of the bhakti movement.

Although the mythical sage Bharata formulated the rasa theory for the first time, he did not explain where rasa was produced and experienced. The credit for the elaboration and systematisation of the rasa theory is attributed to the later Nāṭyaśāstra's commentator Abhinavagupta. In Abhinavagupta's writings 'all synonyms used for aesthetic pleasure are just other names for consciousness free of all obstacles' (Haberman, 2001: 20). Therefore, Abhinavagupta established an analogy between an aesthetic experience, rasa, and a spiritual experience, mokṣa. As Haberman writes 'aesthetic experience, then, for Abhinava is similar to the mystic's experience (*brahmāsvāda*) in that both are uncommon (*alaukika*) experiences in which the self is forgotten' (21).

However, Abhinava argued that while mokṣa is a definitive sense of liberation of the soul from material life, rasa is a transitory, fleeting experience that ends with the end of the performance. In addition, Abhinava also denied the experience of rasa to the performer,

arguing that the true rasa would belong only to the audience. In this regard, Harberman (2001) writes:

Abhinavagupta refuses to grant the aesthetic experience of rasa to the actor. The actor is too close, too technically involved, for Abhinava to permit him to have the experience of rasa. Instead it is the spectator who is free to identify with the depicted situations and thereby experience rasa. (24)

Therefore, although Abhinavagupta established an analogy between aesthetic and spiritual accomplishment, he distinguished rasa from mokṣa, arguing for the superiority of the latter over the former.

Rūpa Gosvāmin elaborated the rasa theory further in order to develop his doctrine of bhakti. Rūpa argued that bhakti was the highest form of rasa and associated it with śṛṅgāra or the sentiment of love (Harberman, 2001: 33). Rūpa argued that Kṛṣṇa, an incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu, was the essence of all rasa, and that love for Kṛṣṇa would grant the devotee an experience of bliss, or ānanda. Therefore, Rūpa Gosvāmin established a direct relationship between bhakti (devotion), śṛṅgāra (amorous sentiment), rasa (aesthetic accomplishment of this love of the devotee towards Kṛṣṇa), and ānanda (spiritual bliss). Unlike Abhinavagupta, Rūpa attributed a spiritual value to rasa, and in fact he employed aesthetic experience not as an analogy for religious practice, but as the fundamental means of devotion.

Rūpa established the *rāgānuṅgā bhakti sādhanā*. As anticipated in the introduction, the *rāgānuṅgā bhakti sādhanā* is a dramatic practice, which has mainly spiritual purposes. The ultimate aim of this practice is to reach God, identified by this tradition with Lord Kṛṣṇa. This is achieved by enacting the role of what Harberman calls ‘paradigmatic individuals’ that is to say those characters that have interacted with Lord Kṛṣṇa during his life, whether as friends, parents, or lovers in his cosmic play, known as rasalīlā.

The devotee is initiated into this mythological character by the spiritual guru. The path of the devotee towards God involves gradually ‘becoming’ the paradigmatic individual, by embodying his or her attitudes and psychophysical features. By means of this superior identity, one is able to ‘reach’ God. In the union with God, one experiences *rasa*, or aesthetic fulfilment, and *ānanda*, or spiritual bliss. Therefore, like Abhinavagupta, Rūpa Gosvāmin too identified spiritual accomplishment in terms of aesthetic accomplishment. However, unlike Abhinava, Rūpa’s identification is not just an analogy, because according to this theologian, *rasa* is actually *mokṣa*, intended as the experience of union of the individual self with the supreme Self. Simply put, Rūpa Gosvāmin used a dramatic technique as a religious and spiritual practice.

Unlike Abhinavagupta, Rūpa Gosvāmin was also a supporter of the idea that *rasa*, or aesthetic and therefore spiritual fulfilment, was first and foremost the experience of the performer-devotee. In his doctrine Rūpa also opposed the idea that *bhakti* is granted by God, regardless of one’s actions, through self-surrendering or *prapatti*. By establishing a very precise practice, the *rāgānugā bhakti sādhanā*, Rūpa supported the idea that anyone can reach God by undergoing a long process of self-refinement, which would gradually transform one’s body, mind and identity into that of the ‘paradigmatic individual.’

I suggest that Rūpa’s spiritual doctrine informs the practice of Odissi, through the value attributed to devotion, practice, self-refinement and self-transcendence. The idea of *prapatti* that, according to Haberman, Rūpa contested, occupies a certain role in dancers’ narratives. However, it always figures as an active surrendering mediated by practice, or *sādhana*. Therefore, in the following sections, I first look at how the sense of the sacred and extraordinary is shaped in dance. Then, I examine how the values that underpin the *bhakti* movement inform the practice of Odissi and dancers’ somatic experience. I suggest that if many Odissi practitioners attribute spiritual value to their artistic endeavour is because the

dance is informed and supported by meanings that, in the context in which they are produced, have spiritual connotations.

### 3. EXTRAORDINARY ACTS

Odissi dancers often conceive their artistic practice as a process of self-refinement through which they can achieve an extraordinary experience of the self. While some dancers explicitly attribute spiritual values to this extraordinary experience, saying that through this they can reach God or some form of divine power, others employ apparently more neutral terms, such as enjoyment, fulfilment, pleasure or connectivity. When using indigenous terms, dancers pass from speaking about *rasa*, a more properly aesthetic concept, to mentioning the more spiritual and philosophical terms of *mokṣa*, *ānanda* or even *śakti*. This sliding between concepts is consistent with the bhakti philosophy of Rūpa Gosvāmin, where, as discussed above, aesthetic and spiritual achievements overlap.

The connection between spiritual and aesthetic experience is built throughout the training and accomplished in performance. In fact, as suggested at the beginning of Layer IV, a sense of the extraordinary imbues the vocabulary and the practice of dance, enabling the process of self-erasure that is deemed to provide a fleeting experience of self-transcendence. In these pages, I further explore this rhetoric of the self, looking at the meanings Odissi practitioners attribute to the experience of the extraordinary in dance, and at the practices and discourses that support these meanings.

Dancers often identify the experience of the extraordinary with the experience of the sacred and the divine. I suggest that this is because the dance vocabulary and practise are imbued with spiritual and religious categories. For instance in Layer IV, I have said that, as part of their



practice, dancers embody extraordinary characters. However, these characters are not simply extraordinary. They are recognised as having a divine nature and often called gods and goddesses. In this respect, Amanda Geroy said:

We embody particular mythological characters, each with different energies. In that sense dance brings you closer to the divine in whatever you perform.

By embodying these divine characters, dancers can experience the sacred and the extraordinary in their own bodies.

I have also mentioned, always in Layer IV, the importance that dancers give to the performance of gestures, such as the *bhūmi praṇām*. In fact, practice can take place virtually at anytime and anywhere, even in a corridor or on a balcony, as long as its beginning and its end are marked by the performance of this gesture. This gesture is 'ritual' in the sense that it actually transforms, although only temporarily, the corporeality of the dance and frames the time and the space of dance out from ordinary temporeality and spatioreality.

If the practice of dance is singled out from ordinary experience, performance provides a further level of suspension of reality. In fact, for the purpose of performance, dancers undergo a process of preparation, through which they gradually transform from an ordinary practitioner into a subject that is potentially ready to experience the divine. The preparation for performance includes the application of heavy make up, the wearing of a canonical costume and jewellery, and ankle bells which are never used during daily training. This process of preparation is often perceived by dancers in terms of ritual acts, which are able to gradually transform one's state of mind and body, preparing it for the experience of performance, and which help the dancer focus on her performance.

In short, dancers conceive their practice as spiritual, because they are constantly dealing with a sense of the divine and the sacred, within a cultural framework that supports and gives

meaning to these experiences. In the following two sections, I examine how two crucial values that underpin the bhakti religious behaviour are pursued in the practice of Odissi and how they inform the subjects' embodied experience. In particular, I focus on the values of self-surrendering and practice.

## 4. FROM SELF-SURRENDERING TO SELF-MASTERING

An analysis of dancers' somatic narratives reveals that training in Odissi cannot be successful without the embodiment of the value of 'self-surrendering', or prapatti. Raman (2007) writes that 'a person does prapatti when he/she surrenders oneself at the feet of God in order to obtain liberation from the cycle of transmigration and attain mokṣa [...] hence prapatti is synonymous with self-surrender' (11). In this section, I examine how this value informs the practice of dance and dancers' embodied experience.

In order to progress in their journey of aesthetic refinement, dancers have to 'surrender' to their guru's guidance. In Odissi this surrendering is often conceived as a form of trust in the guru's teaching and in one's own capacities. This trust must always be mediated by practice. Hence, the value of self-surrendering, or prapatti, is always associated with that of practice, or sādhanā, which I examine more in detail in the following section.

During the learning process, a dancer is expected to accept whatever the teacher says, without questioning or arguing against it. The guru is perceived as the one who knows what is correct and what is not, and especially who can indicate how to correct one's mistakes and improve one's performance. By having already taken the same path, the guru is able to guide the student. The student has to trust the guru's guidance and be 'available' to receive his or her teaching.

This sense of surrendering to the guru's guidance is emphasised and amplified by the fact that most of the training is carried out without the mirror. The mirror is especially prohibited or, at least, strongly discouraged during supervised training and practice. Dancers argue that the mirror is not necessary and in fact it is an obstacle, especially when the teacher is there to correct the student's performance. Ania Pieneck recalled her teacher telling her 'look at me. I am your mirror. I can tell you what you are doing wrong'. While some gurus have incorporated the mirror in the teaching process, and some of them even suggest students to use the mirror during individual practice, especially when away from the teacher for a long time, dancers' narratives show that the relationship between practitioners, mirrors and gurus is a controversial issue. Most of the informants who commented upon this topic, during the interview, admitted the usefulness of the mirror during individual practice but always expressed concerns about how the practitioner has to use it and what kind of relationship she has to establish with it.

In general dancers seemed to fear the dependency of the practitioner on the mirror. For instance, Kumkum Lal argued:

You can use the mirror, but do not depend on the mirror all the time. The teacher will be able to tell you how to correct what mistake you are making. You, maybe, just see it on the mirror, but the teacher will instruct you on how to correct that.

According to Kumkum the problem that the mirror poses is that it can provide feedback on what one is doing, but it cannot suggest 'how' to improve one's skills, something that only the guru is able to do. The practitioner does not know how to reach the perfect embodiment of the dance's aesthetic code. The mirror is like a dead end. By using it, one can improve and reach a certain point in her aesthetic journey, but one cannot go beyond that. The role of the guru is considered crucial to progress in this aesthetic journey, especially because dancers believe there is always scope for improvement.

Another concern that informants often brought up when talking about the mirror was that by regularly using it, one's facial expressions would be 'lost' or 'diluted'. For instance, Ileana Citaristi argued:

If you are without the guru, it may be useful, but somehow I have not adopted it, because I know that it disturbs. If I have a mirror and all the girls are watching into the mirror, expression is lost.

By looking into the mirror, one's attention is directed towards one's own body image, rather than towards the characters or emotions portrayed in the dance. By shifting the practitioner's attention from the inner feeling to the outer image of her dancing body, the mirror does not allow the dancer to become the character she is performing. Dancers argue that if the mirror is good for correcting one's body stances, especially when the focus is on the execution of geometrical shapes with the body, which happens mostly in pure dance, it is certainly an obstacle when practicing abhinaya items and when embodying the paradigmatic characters.

After admitting that she was using the mirror during her own individual practice, Deeksha Sharma quickly added:

The dancer should not be so dependent on the mirror that the facial expression just gets diffused and diluted, because then you cannot move your eyes.

According to Deeksha, if the eyes focus on one's own image reflected in the mirror, one cannot move them as required by the technique and by the choreographies, where the gaze is used to draw attention to the different characters of the dance's imaginary world.

In their narratives, dancers often use the terms 'dependent' or 'dependency', showing that their preoccupation about the mirror has a subtle meaning. This was clearly explained by Sonali Mishra when she said:

in India, a lot of people do not really use the mirror, and I think that is the best way to learn because you have to feel what is right on your body, because when you are on stage you do not have a mirror. [...] When I was in the USA, I did, because every studio would have a mirror and I was practicing in the studio, so I definitely noticed a change when I was practicing with the mirror, but I do not want to get started that dependency. I like to work in India because I think it is better to know for yourself.

Although Sonali admitted that the mirror helped her when practicing away from her guru, she showed concern about becoming 'dependent' on it and she emphasised the importance of 'knowing by oneself' what is correct or not. Therefore, the issue that the mirror poses is that it prevents the dancer from focusing on how the body feels from within and to learn to correct oneself without the support of external aids. However, I suggest that the use of the mirror, by shifting the control of the body from the guru to the student, questions the role of the teacher in the learning process.

The student's surrendering to the guidance of the guru is not meant to create dependency on the teacher either. In fact, Sonali Mishra also explained:

It is definitely important to have your guru in front of you all the time, but when it becomes a dependency and you turn on it to correct it, then it becomes bad because you do not know how to correct yourself.

Therefore, the surrendering to the guru's guidance is instrumental to the process of becoming one's own master. One has to learn not only what is correct, but also how to correct oneself. In other words, the dependency on the guru's guidance is not definitive, but rather instrumental to the achievement of one's own 'independence'. The value of self-surrendering in the practice of Odissi does not entail an act of passive abandonment, but an act of trust in the knowledge of the guru, and it is based on a proactive understanding of the dance aesthetic rules.

Dancers further articulate the value of self-surrendering claiming that, if one practises with full commitment on a daily basis and trusts the guru's guidance, the learning process and one's own capacities, improvements are definitely possible. Explaining this point, Kumkum Lal said:

One has to keep trying to do that, and you will be surprised how much you can train the body. So many things, over a certain period of time, if you make an effort... And your teacher has to guide you how to reach that stage.

Time, commitment, good guidance and practice are the main elements that, according to dancers, enable the process of aesthetic refinement. In short, for dancers improvements cannot be attained without the surrendering of the student to the guru's teaching. However, this relationship that practitioners have to establish with their guru is not meant to create dependency, but rather to eventually grant the dancer with 'liberation' from any form of dependency, whether on the mirror or on the guru, by becoming one's own master through the full understanding of the dance aesthetics. In the following section, I examine in more detail the importance of practice in the process of self-refinement that training entails.

## 5. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE

To train in Odissi mostly means to do practice. To practise or to do practice is to repeat the same movement or choreographic material over and over again with the purpose of memorising and incorporating it, improving the quality of the execution, allowing a spontaneous and fluid performance of steps and gestures that are initially experienced as 'unnatural' or 'awkward', and achieving a deeper understanding of what one is doing. In simple words, to 'practise' means to go deeper into the dance material and to refine one's execution and understanding.

Odissi training includes supervised and individual practice. Supervised practice is done in presence of the guru with the purpose of receiving feedback on how to improve one's performance. Individual practice is that which a practitioner is expected and required to do on her own, and away from her guru. In this respect, Sonali Mishra explained:

I think if you really want to improve as a dancer, practice is the time for you to do all the work. [...] You constantly need that time away from your guru to really just absorb for yourself.

Therefore, individual practice is the moment in which one can 'process' and 'absorb' the recommendations given by the teacher. In fact, training in Odissi basically consists of learning some new dance material, taking some time on one's own trying to remember and trying to embody the dance material and then going back to the guru in order to receive feedback. The practitioner will have then to practise keeping the guru's corrections and comments in mind, eventually returning to her teacher for further adjustments and feedback. This process can ideally go on indefinitely, as dancers strongly believe that there is always space for improvement, for adding details and nuancing one's performance, and for making one's execution more accurate and closer to the perfect ideal of the dancing body.

Although practice in the presence of one's guru clearly plays an important role in the training process, individual practice has a particular value in dancers' narratives. In fact, according to Odissi practitioners, it is the capacity to do individual practice that distinguishes the dancer who will go ahead in the process of aesthetic refinement from the dancer who, despite perhaps having talent, will never be able to achieve important improvements, eventually becoming an 'independent' practitioner.

Dancers know that the quantity of 'practice' that one has to do may vary from individual to individual, so that while some have to practise more, for others the process will be much easier and faster. For example, Sujata Mohapatra said:

Some people do something very easily. That is called inborn talent. Some people practise and do it correctly. Some people practise and have inborn qualities and they become excellent. Some people do not understand how to practise. Some people have talent but they do not want to practise. Sincerity should be there and dedication should be there. And you have to find the channel where you should go. And above all you need a good guide that will make you reach a success goal.

According to Sujata, one has to understand 'how to practise', which means not only to know the dance's aesthetic code, but also and especially to know how to apply this aesthetic code to the individual body, in order to shape it as the aesthetic body of the performer.

To understand how to practise is to become one's own master, to be able to 'identify' one's own mistakes and to understand how to correct them. During individual practice, one recognises one's own weaknesses and strengths. In this sense, practice becomes a psychophysical process of self-cultivation and self-refinement. For dancers practice has a spiritual value, because through this one not only refines the body and the physical skills but also the mind and the self. In fact, some dancers define practice as a form of meditation. Amanda Geroy argued that one should always practise with mental focus, while Sonali stressed that one should always do 'conscious practice' or practice with full presence of mind.

Yuasa (1993) writes that the Japanese term *shugyo* means 'training the body, but it also implies training, as a human being, the spirit or mind by training the body. In other words, 'shugyo' carries the meaning of perfecting the human spirit or enhancing one's personality'



(7). Hence, the process of psychophysical refinement that the term *shugyo* entails is similar to that enabled by practice in Odissi. Practice in Odissi is often defined in terms of *sāadhanā*, and *sāadhanā* is a practice that has spiritual value, being crucial to the *bhakti* devotion. Brahma (2007) explains that the literal meaning of *sāadhanā* is ‘that by which something is performed’ or more precisely a ‘means to an end’ (14). And he continues arguing that: ‘*sāadhanā* includes all the religious practices and ceremonies that are helpful to the realisation of spiritual experience. [...] It is *sāadhanā* which makes the realisation of the experience possible’ (15). Therefore, *sāadhanā* is not simply a physical practice because, as suggested also by Zarrilli (1998), through physical practice one can refine one’s mind and eventually self.

To be able to do individual practice is to be able to control and exercise agency over one’s body and mind. In fact, *sāadhanā* includes the ability to leave aside the troubles of everyday life, by entering into an imaginary world, where the dancer embodies other subjects’ identities, emotions and psychophysical states. When practicing, and even more so when performing, the dancer will not let anything, whether personal or contextual, ‘affect’ her performance. While the performative practice is a complex portrayal of human emotions and troubles, although represented through extraordinary characters and stories, the performer herself has to experience a form of detachment from her own personal emotions and psychophysical states, including the feeling of pain. This ability to control one’s emotional states is considered in a positive way in the context in which the dance practice takes place.

In short, *sāadhanā* acquires for dancers a deep spiritual and transformative value, since to do *sāadhanā* is to be able to control one’s body and mind, and by controlling one’s body and mind, one is able to refine oneself. Writing about techniques of bodily control among Hindu Brahmins in Odia society, Menon (2013) similarly argues:

Self-discipline required to adopt and maintain such constraining practices refines human nature, shaping raw human beings into cultural artefacts that are now worthy of respect.

Restrictions on behaviour, then, from a Hindu perspective are positively valued – they are the techniques provided by culture to shape and polish human beings. (198)

Part of the value of *sāadhanā* lies in that fact that one actually wants to ‘practise’ and does it spontaneously rather than only if asked. Despite the discipline that *sāadhanā* requires, practice is associated with a sense of fulfilment and empowerment. This sense of fulfilment derives from the sensation that one is pursuing a process of refinement that will eventually grant an extraordinary experience in which aesthetic and spiritual accomplishment overlap.

As Sikand (2010) writes, *sāadhanā* is:

a combination of discipline and practice ideally done with the guidance of a guru. It is a practice characterised by intention, and is based on the idea that through repetition and awareness there is a movement towards perfection. [...] Even if you are not rehearsing or practicing steps or performing, *sāadhanā* informs how you conduct yourself both on and off stage. (96)

Therefore, *sāadhanā* includes physical practice, but also mental, emotional and psychological attitudes. *Sāadhanā* is about self-mastering and self-refining. Through practice one is able to refine her understanding of the dance, perfect her skills, improve her performance. This is achieved through daily training, which has to be done with pleasure and full consciousness, and which includes the endurance of pain and the capacity of postponing self-gratification, by accepting that things will sooner or later happen. Through *sāadhanā* one is able to proceed towards the experience of self-transcendence, in which one can finally ‘become the dance’ by forgetting or even ‘erasing’ the ego. Therefore, by surrendering to the teaching of the guru and by doing regular and conscious practice one is able to refine the self, and thanks to this refinement eventually achieve an extraordinary experience in performance. In the following

section, I look at how the process of self-refinement is experienced and articulated in the practice of Odissi.

## 6. THE REFINEMENT OF THE SELF

Odissi practitioners do not normally speak of their practice in terms of self-refinement.

However, an analysis of their somatic narratives shows that they experience the training as a process of psychophysical cultivation, through which the self is aesthetically shaped. To articulate this process, dancers sometimes use the term *saṃskāra*. In Hindu philosophy, this term indicates the process of refinement that, through the accomplishment of acts, the individual undergoes towards the ultimate experience of liberation from material life, or *mokṣa*. When I asked Sujata Mohapatra why it is important to repeat the same movements and choreographies over and over again, she answered:

When we grow, one day we are daughters, one day we are wives, one day we are mothers. From child to mother, there is a process... if in our house we do learn good things... maybe you are a daughter but nobody will like you, maybe you are a wife but your attitude nobody will like it, maybe you are a mother-in-law and nobody will like you. It is what we say *saṃskāra*. It's a teaching method, a discipline from your house. So dance is like a discipline. So dance is life, you have to make from the scratch all the discipline to go ahead, and that is why we do the basic steps everyday, to make our body grounded.

Therefore, Sujata drew a comparison between aesthetic refinement and refinement of the individual social self, which implies the undertaking of different roles in society. *Saṃskāra* is a discipline that day-by-day allows one to grow and be morally (and aesthetically) appreciated by her community. This discipline starts from the first steps as a young woman in society or as a student of dance and gradually proceeds through different consecutive stages. Through this process of development one is able to 'ground' the body. To 'ground'

the body means to fortify it and make it confident of the dance skills it possesses or, in the case of a woman, of her moral 'strength'.

Sujata also used to say that once mistakes are incorporated, through repetition, it is very difficult to eliminate them from the body of the practitioner. Recalling her guru's words, Sonali explained:

once the mistake becomes habituated in your body, you basically would practise it wrong.  
So undoing that is very very difficult.

According to dancers the process of refinement has to be gradual and constant. Through this discipline, one is able to become morally and aesthetically strong and as such is appreciated both as a woman and as a dancer. Therefore, the process of refinement that training entails weaves together aesthetic and moral principles, based on social acceptance. Along similar lines, Menon (2013) has suggested that among Odia Hindus:

The goal of human existence is conceptualised as a movement towards perfecting oneself as a cultural artefact through subjecting natural processes and natural impulses to cultural reshaping. (197)

Self-refinement is constantly pursued in the practice of Odissi through the emphasis placed by dancers on 'polishing' one's technique, 'internalising' the dance compositions, 'understanding' the characters or the meanings behind the gestures, perceiving the 'nuances' of the movement vocabulary and conceiving the training as a process of 'layering'. To become one's own master is the intermediate goal of this process of self-refinement, while to experience self-transcendence is the final goal of this psychophysical cultivation.

The idea of 'polishing' or 'perfecting' one's technique or interpretation is central to Odissi training. The guru works with the student, refining her technical and interpretative skills to

the smallest detail and continuously adjusting the dancer's body to the aesthetic ideal of the dance. At the same time, the student works, especially during individual practice, through the corrections given by the guru, in order to improve her dance skills. The guru continuously 'revises' the student's skills. This apparently endless revision instils in the practitioner's mind the idea that the dance technique is never completely polished, and the understanding of an item never completely achieved. Reflecting a shared belief, Sujata Mohapatra, for instance, argued that one should seek her guru's guidance on a regular basis in order to continuously rectify the dance.

After six months or one year you come back to your guru to rectify again and again, and your experience sometimes will also help you.

As long as one is under the guru's guidance, and normally one is under a guru as long as the guru is alive, the practitioner needs to search for her master to approve the correctness of her execution. Only the guru is able to help the student refine her technique and interpretation. Kumkum Lal claimed that one might be able to see one's own mistakes reflected in the mirror, but she would not normally know how to correct them, without the guru's advice. Therefore, according to dancers there is always space for improvement and for further refinement and only the guru can provide indications on how to go forwards in this endless journey.

Sujata's words also reveal that with experience and thanks to the knowledge and skills already acquired, one is eventually able to know how to correct oneself and become one's own master. However, this can happen only when one has sufficiently internalised the movement vocabulary and made sense of the aesthetic ideal of the dance. In this respect, Kavita Dwibedi claimed:

Initially it is only what you learn from your guru and then you try to imitate. But once you start realising it and start questioning it, this means that you are getting into the dance, into

the inner aspects of the dance. When this happens, I do not know. Maybe slowly, slowly, it happens, and then you start enjoying the dance.

Dancers insist that the cultivation of one's body and mind in dance is not something that takes place overnight, but it requires time and, in fact, it can never be definitely completed. When I asked Kumkum Lal how one can understand if some skill is finally set in her body, she answered:

I think that stage of thinking that you know it very well never comes, because you are constantly learning and interpreting.

The guru helps the student in her process of refinement but eventually it is the student who has to take the lead, so to speak, in order for this process to be truly successful. One has to be able to become one's own master, but this is possible only after having gone through a long process of 'refinement' facilitated and led by the guru.

The improvements in one's performance and interpretation of the dance vocabulary are also often articulated through the term 'internalisation.' To say that one has internalised a movement or a choreographic item is to say that one has achieved confidence and spontaneity in performing it. Internalisation does not only concern the technique, but also the interpretation of a character, the understanding of the actions and stories portrayed, the capacity to perceive the subtle nuances of the music and to correctly execute the movement accordingly. Together with 'polishing,' the term 'internalisation' as used in relation to the dance vocabulary articulates the process of self-refinement as it is undertaken in Odissi training. In fact, dancers often contend that although it is possible to learn a dance composition in a few days, one needs years in order to thoroughly internalise and understand the dance material.

Dancers use the term 'internalisation' particularly when speaking of the interpretation of some character in abhinaya items. To internalise a character is to understand his or her psychophysical features and to be able to portray them with confidence. Only through this long process one can eventually 'become' the character she is performing. Dancers believe that this understanding is achieved by doing and by reflecting on what one is doing, over years of practice. It is something that requires time and careful consideration. For this reason, dancers normally believe that the best interpretations of pantomimic items are those given by senior dancers. In fact, only after decades of practice and study, has a performer internalised and achieved a nuanced understanding of the stories and characters portrayed in the dance, of the way they act and react to specific situations, and of the way they interact with each other.

According to dancers, to fully understand a character and, in fact, to fully interpret a piece of abhinaya may take years. Sujata Mohapatra explained:

When you are comfortable with your character, you can do your best to explore that character. [...] So many days of experience already give you the stability, the understanding, and you become comfortable when you are steady, when you know what you are doing, when you know that you can project the best.

To be comfortable with the character means to have internalised it and to be able to 'become' that character in dance. Amanda Geroy explained how she used to go through the process of understanding a character, by saying:

You have to understand the character enough and that starts for me with the mental process, and then slowly, just kind of doing it so many times. You know, sometimes there are parts that I am not getting, and I go really slowly, and I have a kind of dialogue in my head, like 'these persons have different relationships and they are feeling this...'

Therefore, by having practised the dance vocabulary many times and by having systematically reflected upon the meanings and gestures portrayed in the dance compositions, one is gradually able to go deeper into her skills and to give a more thorough interpretation of the characters and of the dance compositions.

To learn a piece of abhinaya becomes for a dancer a long process of psychophysical, religious, literary, musical and historical exegesis. According to senior dancers, one has to understand who is the poet of the composition on which the item is based, the context in which the poem was written and the specificity of the poet's language. One also has to understand whose is the main 'voice' in the choreography and what is the main emotion portrayed, who are the characters, what they do in the dance, what they have already done that affects their 'present' state, how they react to each other's actions and what emotions derive from their actions, and so on. Clearly, to understand all these subtleties in the meanings and forms of the dance compositions takes a long time, and a lot of practice carried out both individually and in presence of one's guru.

Kumkum Lal explained this digging into movement in the following way:<sup>107</sup>

To do a good abhinaya, first of all you must understand... abhinaya, as you know, is an interpretation of a song or a piece of poetry, so you must understand what it is all about. When you reach certain words of the song, then you must know each word properly, and you must know the context of it. So, now, very often the songs are in Sanskrit, which people are familiar with, but they do not know the language. Or, if it is an Odia song, then it is an archaic Odia, so again it is not very clear what it means. The language is one thing. Then, the poet has his own conceptions, and his own metaphors and similes, which also you have to unravel. What is he saying? But most of all you have to see what is the mood, and what is the emotion of that song, which we call bhāva, what is the main emotion in the song, and

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<sup>107</sup> This explanation refers to pantomimic items, where emphasis is placed on understanding the characters, but a similar discourse is also used for items of pure dance. Here, the emphasis is on understanding the subtleties of the music and the movement and how they fit each other.



how to get that in your interpretation of the song. Now, in all of this the role of the teacher is very important, because the teacher himself or herself must know the meaning of the song thoroughly and must also understand the mood of the song, the character, what is the person feeling. It is not a mechanical thing that, word-by-word, you just do it.

Therefore, the process of refining one's interpretation of a character or of an entire dance composition involves a long process of exploration, initially facilitated by the teacher, but that eventually depends on the student's willingness to cultivate.

For some dancers it is important to have experienced, in their own life, the emotions and the psychophysical state of the character they are portraying in dance. For instance, Sujata Mohapatra often used to recall Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra complaining against her interpretation of Yasoda, Lord Kṛṣṇa's mother. Sujata used to say that until she actually had her own daughter, she was not able to portray the care a mother would use when putting her baby to sleep, while scolding and showing disappointment at his behaviour. However, most performers argue that it is not necessary to have experienced a certain emotion or psychophysical state in order to be able to portray it in dance. The case of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's interpretation of Rādhā is exemplary in this respect, as it is clear that, strictly speaking, he had never been the character which he could so sublimely embody. According to Sujata, her guru's pantomimic skills depended very much on his subtle observation of life taking place around him. This suggests that to be a refined interpreter of Odissi, and especially of pantomimic items, means also to be a refined observer of real life. Self-refinement is a process in which one is able to perfect and polish the self, by acquiring knowledge of the multiplicity of psychophysical states, through subtle observation and understanding as well as through direct enactment of those states.

The process of refinement of one's own dance skills and knowledge also concerns the way the dancer is able to perceive the subtleties of the music to which the dance compositions

are choreographed and executed. Amanda Geroy explained that in abhinaya one could explore the nuances of the music, by focusing:

On the beat and trying to really match the movement with the beat, or sometimes on the song, the singing, how the literal meaning of the lyrics is informing how we do the movement. So I think there are different ways to interpret based on the music.

Teachers often suggest listening very carefully to the music in order to go deeper into it and in order to perfectly match it with the dance movement, so that finally movement and music become a unique integrated event for both the performer and the audience.

Finally dancers often speak about the nuances of the style, intending those details in the movement vocabulary that can hardly be perceived by the neophyte. These details gradually reveal themselves to the practitioner with the acquisition and refinement of the skills. Dancers argue that these nuances are what make one really look like an Odissi dancer, suggesting that a mature performer is for them one who has been able to refine one's ability to perceive and embody movement details.

In short, the process of self-refinement is experienced and articulated in Odissi in terms of polishing the technique, internalising the dance vocabulary, understanding the stories and characters portrayed in the compositions, and perceiving the nuances of the music and movement. This process of self-refinement requires a long time to be accomplished and perhaps it is never definitely accomplished. Nevertheless, it regulates the practice and embodied experience of the self in relation to the dance practice. It is through self-refinement that one can eventually achieve a sense of self-transcendence. In Menon's (2013) words:

From the Oriya Hindu perspective, the path to experiencing, even fleetingly, in this world, the bliss that supposedly characterises enlightenment and final liberation, is to refine ourselves. Self-refinement, in short, is the path toward transcendence. (217)

In the last section of this chapter I look at how dancers articulate this extraordinary experience in performance.

## 7. TRANSPARENT BODIES

I have argued that Odissi dancers experience their artistic practice as a process of psychophysical cultivation, through which, by working on the body, they are able to refine also their mind, identity and sense of self. This process of self-refinement is regulated by certain values, in particular the student's trust in the guru's teaching and committed practice. Dancers believe that this process requires time and dedication to be carried out correctly although perhaps it is never definitely accomplished. This process eventually enables an extraordinary, although fleeting, experience of the self in performance. This experience is extraordinary not because it is impossible to achieve, but because it is perceived as optimal and charged with positive meanings, and in fact identified with the ultimate, although temporary, aesthetic accomplishment. In other words, if one's process of self-refinement is carried out adequately, one can achieve, when performing in front of an audience, an experience that dancers describe in terms of self-transcendence or self-forgetfulness.

This experience is for dancers integrative and transformative. It is integrative in that through this one is able to achieve a sense of unity in the self, by overcoming different forms of duality, in particular the duality between body and mind, dancer and dance, or performer and audience. This experience is also transformative in that one becomes able to

go beyond the ordinary sense of self and, in so doing, to 'become' something else, even if only for a fleeting moment.

In the previous chapter, Layer II, I have discussed how dancers articulate this experience in terms of body-mind relationships and I have examined the discourses and practices that enable or hinder the achievement of this psychophysical state. In the last section of this chapter, I look at the same issue, but from a slightly different perspective, focusing in particular on the spiritual value dancers attribute to this optimal experience in performance. In fact, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this extraordinary experience dancers talk about is related to what Csikszentmihalyi (1991) defines as 'flow'. My argument is that dancers attribute spiritual meanings to this optimal experience in performance, because the cultural context in which the practice of dance takes place provides specific explanations for interpreting and articulating this experience and these explanations have spiritual connotations.

The optimal aesthetic experience is an experience in which one can come into direct contact with a sense of the sacred, the extraordinary and the divine. I have suggested that this overlapping of aesthetic and spiritual accomplishment cannot be considered only an expedient for promoting the dance on the urban and global stage enhancing its aura of mysticism and exoticism, but must be understood within the socio-cultural context in which this identification takes place. In particular, it must be understood in relation to the rhetoric of the bhakti movement, especially as formulated by Rūpa Gosvāmin, according to whom aesthetic and spiritual accomplishment coincide and are both achieved through practice, active surrendering and the embodiment of 'paradigmatic individuals'.

Even when dancers describe their optimal experience in performance through terms such as pleasure and fulfilment, they are still employing a vocabulary that is derived from the bhakti movement and that must be understood in relation to this. In fact, while some

dancers explicitly attribute spiritual values to their optimal experience in performance, by saying that through this they can reach God or experience some form of divine power, others employ apparently more neutral terms, such as enjoyment, fulfilment, pleasure and connectivity. When using indigenous terms, dancers pass from speaking about *rasa*, a more properly aesthetic concept, to mentioning the more spiritual and philosophical terms of *mokṣa*, or liberation, *ānanda*, or spiritual bliss, and *śakti*, or power. I suggest that this sliding between aesthetic and spiritual concepts is rooted in the bhakti doctrine, especially as established by Rūpa Gosvāmin.

Guru Ratikant Mohapatra argued that ‘inner satisfaction through dance is like achieving God’. Similarly Sujata Mohapatra claimed that when dancing she could feel the same energy as when doing puja, the Hindu worshipping ritual. She said: ‘I can at anytime think about God. You can reach him through dance.’ Amanda Geroy affirmed that by embodying the characters of gods and goddesses, as they are portrayed in the dance vocabulary, one can come closer to the divine and feel in her own body the energy of those divine characters. Therefore, dancers describe a successful performance as an experience in which they can come into direct and close contact with God or some form of divine power. The dancers feel the divine within their dancing body. Through dance, one can ‘join’ and ‘unite’ with this sense of the sacred.

Other dancers emphasise the sense of unity and integration they experience when having a successful performance. For instance, Sonali Mishra explained that the ideal experience in performance is one in which the dancer experiences her body and mind as being one. This sense of unity concerns also the relationship of the performer with the audience. In fact, as I have already mentioned, for dancers a truly valuable optimal performative experience is the one achieved in presence of a real audience. In this respect, Priyambada Pattnaik said:

Indian classical dance is like a journey. [...] You know you are travelling. The same thing, you take the audience with you, you are not alone for that journey. So, when the audience becomes very silent [...] they are speechless, so this means that they are journeying with the dancer. And the dancer is such a good performer that she has taken all of them with her. That is called the perfect performance.

According to Priyambada, the optimal experience in performance is one in which the dancer is able to travel and to take the audience with her in her journey. Therefore, Priyambada emphasises the shared character of this experience that the performer undergoes together with the audience, taking the lead of the process. Perhaps the power that dancers feel when they achieve this ideal performative state depends on the awareness of being able to control the audience's consciousness. In fact, Amanda Geroy said:

If you can hold the audience and their consciousness with your focus, it becomes so powerful on stage. You can leap somewhere you could never have gone alone.

As a journey, performance is transformative because it changes, although perhaps only provisionally, the perception of the self. By achieving full identification with the dance and the characters here portrayed, one can become something else. By 'becoming' something else, the performer is able to forget or transcend the self, and in so doing, she can experience the divine. As Priyambada put it:

Then you are not more Priyambada, who knows dancing and teaching and all these things [...]. At the end of your dance, you do not feel that this is your body, you feel like 'it's nothing in my body'. You have completed your goal, nothing, you are connected with power, which you do not know is Supreme Power. But you are connected, you are not in that body.

Priyambada is therefore talking about a state in which one's identity, body and mind are provisionally transcended.

Dancers also often employ the term 'connectivity' to articulate optimal experience in performance. Kavita Dwibedi and Sujata Mohapatra in particular used this term to explain the relationship between dancers and accompanying musicians. For instance, Kavita said:

If the musician who is singing or who is playing, if they are 100% into it... it is not just that I am dancing and they are playing. It is the connectivity.

Hence, a successful experience in performance is one in which there is a sense of connectivity and integration between dance and music. Along similar lines, Sujata said:

If the singer doesn't give me that cue, that sparkle in the voice, then for me to get that 100% on my own it is difficult.

The ideal performative state is one in which all the elements of the performance, that is the dancers, the musicians and the audience, partake of the same event, they share the same sense of an extraordinary spatio-temporal reality. They participate to a sort of cosmic drama, as suggested by Rūpa Gosvāmin.

For dancers it is also important to be able to enjoy dancing, at the same time projecting this enjoyment to the audience. Sujata argued:

The first thing: you have to enjoy your dance. If you enjoy, then public enjoy. If you do not enjoy, if you do not feel happy when you dance, people will never get that rasa from you.

Sujata's words echo Rūpa Gosvāmin's insistence on the fact that the performer-devotee has to enjoy first and foremost, in order for the audience to enjoy, too. To enjoy is to experience rasa. Nevertheless, to enjoy does not necessarily mean to project only positive emotions. As Schechner (2001) has explained, enjoyment in performance derives from the capacity of transcending one's own individual emotions. Hence, enjoyment can be

experienced also in front of the portrayal of sorrow, anger or disgust, all emotions that are normally considered negative. For dancers, enjoyment depends on the performer's identification with the character performed. As I have argued above, this identification is possible through the refinement of one's skills, experience, understanding and therefore it comes with time, dedication, practice and trust in the guru's guidance.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that dancers experience training as a process of self-refinement, which, if correctly carried out, enables an experience of self-transcendence during public performance. I have suggested that this state of self-transcendence corresponds to an optimal experience in performance. Odissi practitioners interpret this experience through the categories provided by the cultural context in which the dance practices and discourses take place. These cultural categories have spiritual connotations. In fact, they identify aesthetic accomplishment with spiritual accomplishment, and hence with the experience of something sacred, extraordinary and divine.

I have maintained that the spiritual meanings that Odissi practitioners ascribe to their experience of the dance are consistent with the values that underpin the bhakti movement, especially as elaborated by the medieval theologian Rūpa Gosvāmin. Throughout this chapter, I have examined how these spiritual meanings inform the practice of dance and dancers' embodied experience, for example taking into account how the values of self-surrendering, self-mastering, practice and self-refinement are pursued through the dance training. I have also argued that even when they use terms which are apparently more neutral, such as enjoyment, fulfilment, pleasure or connectivity, dancers are still referring to the bhakti philosophy that takes the identification of the devotee-performer with the



paradigmatic character as the means through which the union with the divine may be achieved and that equals the devotee's experience of union with God to a sensual communion.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main aim of this study has been to examine embodied experience in Odissi dance. In particular, I was interested in understanding how this experience is shaped by cultural practices and discourses and, hence, how it is informed by specific values and meanings. I was also interested in understanding how Odissi dancers would make sense of their embodied experience in dance through the categories provided by the context of the practice, whether or not they ascribed themselves to this specific context. Therefore, this study was set up to investigate the tension between a dance practice which is normally considered culturally specific, and a group of dance practitioners defined here as 'transcultural' as they could not or would not ascribe themselves to a specific cultural context.

This work is relevant not only because it demonstrates how certain practices, discourses, values and meanings shape embodied experience, but also because it argues against the cultural essentialism of embodied experience. In fact, my argument throughout this work is that embodied experience is shaped by practices and discourses. Despite being culturally specific, embodied experience can be accessed and shared through the sharing of the practices and discourses that support it and through the acquisition of the values and meanings that inform it. Simply put, in the case of dance, embodied experience is shaped by the training and by the discourses that concern and support both the learning process and the performative practice. In particular, in this work I have suggested that, through training, subjects learn to experience their bodies, minds, identities and selves in a

culturally relevant way and give certain meanings to these experiences, whether or not they ascribe themselves to the context in which these meanings are produced.

By contending that the experience of body, mind, identity and self is shaped by training, this work consequently argues for the transcultural accessibility and plasticity of these experiences. This view pushes even further Butler's (1990) provocation about the performativity of gender, suggesting that if identities are 'constructed' through the repetition of stylised acts, embodied experiences too must be shaped and changed by the acquisition of these performative identities. This argument, in my opinion, demystifies many forms of cultural inaccessibility and identifies culture with practices and discourses, breaking its link with categories such as ethnicity or nationality. My research clearly breaks this link by involving in the analysis transnational and transcultural subjects and by demonstrating that they share a common dance culture and a consistent way of articulating embodied experience.

However, it is worth remarking that in this study I have focused mainly on the shared aspects of my informants' embodied experience, rather than on their peculiarities. In fact, these peculiarities were often overshadowed during the interviews by the rhetoric of 'self-erasure' that characterises the practice of Odissi and that I have discussed and problematised throughout this work. I have proposed that, despite this rhetoric, dancers 'inflect' the cultural categories that inform the practice depending on who produces the discourses and who is engaged in the practice of dance. In particular, I have demonstrated how discourses about embodied experience are woven together with discourses about gender, ethnicity and power. This issue was more thoroughly and explicitly discussed in Layer IV, although it recurs in a more indirect way throughout the other chapters, especially whenever I examined the relationships between gurus and students, dancers and musicians, women and men.

Dancers often manipulate shared cultural categories to question the inclusion of certain subjects in the practice of dance or simply to make sense of their artistic practice for themselves. This is for example the case, examined in Layer IV, of the different meanings dancers attribute to the sense of empowerment derived from the practice of Odissi. In this respect, I have also suggested that the context in which the practice takes place provides dancers with categories through which to make sense of certain embodied experiences which, in another context, would perhaps acquire different meanings. This point was examined in Layer I, where I maintained that dancers attribute spiritual value to their training and optimal experience in performance, because the context of the practice provides and consistently supports these spiritual meanings.

In relation to this point, I have contested post-colonial views of Indian aesthetics as a simple reaction to or emulation of western discourses about the East. I have proposed that an examination of practitioners' subjective experience opens new fields of inquiry, which are relevant to the understanding not only of embodied experience, but also of wider socio-cultural needs. In this respect, I propose that post-colonial scholarship needs to be integrated with research that, focusing on subjective explanations, tries to understand what needs practitioners fulfil by being involved in the practice of Indian dance that they cannot fulfil otherwise.

By shifting the focus on to practices, discourses and skills, this research also draws attention to how different bodily techniques and different performative expectations instantiate different embodied experiences. This is a crucial point for the understanding of embodied experience, beyond the scope of this study. In fact, on a general level, this research suggests that the subjective experience of body, mind and self, and consequently of consciousness, memory, attention, emotion or proprioception is variably perceived, interpreted and articulated depending on the embodied practices carried out and on the

meanings attributed to them. This point was especially examined in Layer II, where I have argued that dancers experience body-mind relationships in different ways depending on the objectives they are pursuing. In fact, I have suggested that certain experiences of body-mind relationships are valued for certain purposes and in certain contexts, but devalued for others. I have also proposed that certain experiences of body-mind relationships are enabled or hindered by the expectations placed upon the performers and therefore by the principles that support the dance's aesthetic and moral canon. Would a change in the techniques of transmission and in the aesthetics and expectations placed upon the dancers also produce a shift in embodied experience? This is an interesting line of inquiry that demands further research on embodied experience in other performative practices.

In this research, I have also provided insights on how issues of power, especially based on gender and dance expertise, inform the aesthetics of the dance and practitioners' embodied experience. In this respect, I have proposed, particularly in Layer II, that in examining embodied experience in dance one has to take into account the terms dancers use to 'legitimate' the aesthetic code and who is entitled to define, approve or change this aesthetic code. In this respect, in Layer III, I have suggested that discourses about the 'scientific' character of Odissi dance vocabulary and of the learning process, which dancers use to raise the value of their embodied knowledge, instantiate particular embodied experiences, support the process of self-erasure and present the dance aesthetics in terms of rules which have an 'objective' shared value and which are not susceptible to subjective interpretations. An understanding of embodied experience in dance, beyond the scope of this research, would certainly benefit from further research on discourses about the science of the dancing body and how they affect dancers' embodied experience.

While examining how embodied experience is informed by cultural categories, in this research I was also concerned with demonstrating the hybrid nature of these categories

and the tensions that characterise dancers' somatic narratives. This goal runs throughout the dissertation. This emerges, for example, in Layer V where I suggest that the body of the dance practitioner becomes a site where relations of power among gurus are played out, although they are often articulated in terms of nuances in the movement or choreographic vocabulary. It also underpins my examination, in Layer IV, of gender and ethnic identities and, in particular, of the concept of 'grace', which I suggested is derived from both local and non-local ideas about women and morality. Moreover, it is an underlying theme in Layer III, where I look at the tension between 'aesthetics' and 'sciences' that characterises discourses about the body in Odissi and where I examine how dancers experience the relation between the sense of the individual self and the sense of the relational self. Similarly, this goal emerges in Layer II, where I discuss the tension dancers' narratives establish between training and performance and between different experiences of body-mind relationships. Finally, this goal is also pursued in Layer I, especially when I look at the tension between self-surrendering and self-mastering and at the relationship between students and gurus during the learning process.

Through the examination of the tensions that characterise Odissi practices and discourses and therefore practitioners' narratives, I aimed at providing a nuanced picture of embodied experience in dance, and at demonstrating the hybrid and plastic nature of cultural meanings and values. I also hope I have made clear that although originating within a certain context, cultural categories may be 'embodied' by transcultural bodies.

This research leaves unanswered the issue of how practitioners would give sense to their embodied experience of dance in a context which does not support the values that inform the practice of Odissi, as described in this dissertation. For instance, I have suggested that dancers attribute spiritual meanings and values to both the training process and to optimal experience in performance. However, how would dancers articulate their embodied

experience in a socio-cultural environment, which does not encourage these spiritual explanations? Similarly, how would embodied experience change if the dance aesthetics would not put emphasis on the geometrical aspects of the movement vocabulary, on the accurate repetition of the dance compositions, or on the emotional quality of the performance? I have also demonstrated that embodied experience is informed by issues of power, characterising among others the relationships between dancers and musicians. How would embodied experience be affected if these relationships were reverted or perhaps simply questioned? And, in general, how does embodied experience change if the focus is on improvisation rather than on memory or on challenging the aesthetics rather than on adhering to them?

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEWEES' PROFILE

#### **1. Carolina Prada** (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011) New Delhi

Odissi and Chhau dancer from Colombia, Carolina has trained in different bodily disciplines, including Aikido, Kung Fu, Capoeira and has been exposed to eastern philosophies and practices. Since 2008, Carolina has lived in New Delhi. She has trained in Odissi under Priyambada Pattnaik and in Mayurbhanj Chhau under Guru Janmejoy Saibabu.

#### **2. Deeksha Sharma** (2<sup>nd</sup> March 2011) New Delhi

Deeksha is a young full-time science teacher, based in New Delhi. She started her Odissi training at the age of 24, after achieving economical independence and professional security. Deeksha has been learning Odissi under Priyambada Pattnaik, at Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra.

#### **3. Priyambada Pattnaik** (3<sup>rd</sup> March 2011) New Delhi

Priyambada Pattnaik is a professional Odissi dancer and teacher, who has been training since early age under different gurus. She completed her training in Nrityagram, Bangalore. Priyambada presently lives in New Delhi and teaches Odissi at Sri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra.

#### **4. Anandita Banerjee** (8<sup>th</sup> May 2011) New Delhi

Anandita is a young Odissi student from Kolkata. At the time of the interview, she was leaving in New Delhi, where she was learning Odissi under Priyambada Pattnaik at Shri Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra.

#### **5. Sharon Lowen** (21<sup>st</sup> May 2011) New Delhi

Sharon Lowen is a renowned Odissi exponent from the USA. She has previously trained, among others, in Western modern dance, in Manipuri and Chhau. She started learning Odissi in 1975, under guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Sharon Lowen is now permanently based in New Delhi.



**6. Moushumi Joshi** (28<sup>th</sup> May 2011) New Delhi

Moushumi Joshi is a young professional lawyer, based in New Delhi. She initially studied Kathak. However, after having seen performances by the Nrityagram Ensemble, Moushumi decided to focus only on Odissi. She has trained under Priyambada Pattnaik through private tuitions or small group classes.

**7. Surjit Nongmeikapam** (31<sup>st</sup> May 2011) New Delhi

Surjit is a dancer from Manipur. He has trained in many dance styles, including Manipuri, Kathak, Odissi and Indian Martial Arts. Eventually he turned to contemporary dance, becoming a successful performer and choreographer.

**8. Anonymous** (31<sup>st</sup> May 2011) New Delhi

Japanese dancer living in New Delhi. She decided to learn Indian dance in order to understand better Indian culture.

**9. Ania Pieniek** (3<sup>rd</sup> June 2011) New Delhi

Ania Pieniek is a Polish fashion designer. She has lived permanently in India since 2008. She learned dance since childhood, although with no professional purposes. She studied several dance styles, such as European folk dances, ballet, belly dance and Odissi. Her dance training was always complementary to music studies and the interest in other cultures.

**10. Ipshita Behoora** (1<sup>st</sup> November 2011) New Delhi

Ipshita Behoora is a dancer based in New Delhi, originally from Odisha. She started learning Odissi as a child because of her mother's will. She then abandoned dance for 15 years eventually returning to it to discover her feminine side.

**11. Kavita Dwibedi** (8<sup>th</sup> November 2011) New Delhi

Kavita Dwibedi is the daughter and disciple of Odissi guru Harekrishna Behera. Kavita is a refined interpreter of Odissi and is particularly praised for her deep abhinaya. She was born and raised in New Delhi from Odia parents.

**12. Ratikant Mohapatra** (4<sup>th</sup> February 2012) Bhubaneswar

Son of guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Ratikant is a performer, choreographer, percussionist and dance teacher. He is the director of Srjan, one of the most prestigious schools for Odissi training in Bhubaneswar. He has composed numerous items, expanding the repertoire inherited from his father.

**13. Ileana Citaristi** (8<sup>th</sup> February 2012) Bhubaneswar

Ileana Citaristi is an Odissi dancer and choreographer from Italy. After working in theatre, in 1979 she moved to India to study Odissi under Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She lives in Bhubaneswar, speaks Odia and has opened her own Odissi school, attended by many local students.

**14. Amanda Geroy** (24<sup>th</sup> February 2012) Bhubaneswar

Amanda Geroy began studying Odissi in 1999 and initially trained for seven years under Guru Jyoti Rout in San Francisco, California. In 2006, she moved to Odisha, to learn Odissi under Sujata Mohapatra. She lived in Bhubaneswar on a permanent basis until 2013. She currently teaches dance and theatre in India and the USA.

**15. Sonali Mishra** (28<sup>th</sup> February 2012) Bhubaneswar

Sonali Mishra is a dancer born in an Odia family and grown up in the USA. She started learning Bharatanatyam at the age of 5 old. Lately, she decided to focus only on Odissi. Her interest in Odissi motivated her to learn Odia language and culture. When I interviewed her, Sonali had recently moved to India to live there on a permanent basis.

**16. Sujata Mohapatra** (8<sup>th</sup> March 2012) Bhubaneswar

Sujata Mohapatra is the most acclaimed and refined exponent of Odissi dance nowadays. She trained for about two decades under Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Sujata Mohapatra is also an extremely sought-after teacher, able to instil in her students passion and devotion for Odissi.

**17. Marcela Palomo** (4<sup>th</sup> May 2012) New Delhi

Marcela Palomo is an Odissi dancer from Mexico. She has studied Odissi since 1995, under different gurus. She is also a practitioner of Ashtanga Yoga. At the time of the interview she was learning Odissi under Madhavi Mudgal in New Delhi.

**18. Kumkum Lal** (11<sup>th</sup> May 2012) New Delhi

Kumkum Lal trained for nearly four decades under guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She is especially known for her subtle and deep abhinaya and her understanding of the Sanskrit texts used in the Odissi repertoire. She was a key figure in developing the knowledge of Odissi in Japan, where she lived for several years.

**19. Radhika Samson** (19<sup>th</sup> May 2012) New Delhi

Radhika Samson is a young Odissi dancer from New Delhi. She started training in Odissi because of her mother's fascination with this dance form. She has also studied sitar and Indian philosophy. Radhika regularly goes to Odisha to train under Sujata Mohapatra.

# INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

This is an indicative, but not exhaustive, list of questions used during the interviews. The questions were adjusted to the profile of the interviewee and to the flow of the conversations.

## **Introduction:**

This research is about what you feel and think when you are learning dance, training on your own or with the guru and performing for an audience. I am really interested in your deep personal experience of the body and in your state of mind.

## **1. Dance background:**

- Could you introduce yourself, tell us how you started learning Odissi and why this particular style?

## **2. Somatic experience in dance:**

Experience of the body in training and strategies for acquiring, developing and mastering skills:

- What do you remember about your first Odissi classes?
- What were your sensations, feelings and thoughts when you started learning?
- How did these sensations, feelings and thoughts change over time?
- How do you learn a new skill?
- How this process of learning has changed over time?
- How do you make sure you have acquired a particular skill?
- Do you use a mirror or do you rely only on your guru? And how would your experience differ when you practise with a mirror and when you don't?
- How do you work through the corrections given by the teacher?
- On what do you focus when learning a new skill?
- How do you make sure you have acquired a skill correctly?
- On what do you focus when you think you have already acquired a skill?
- How does the feeling of your body change when you are mastering a skill?
- What if the teacher tells you that the skill you thought it was right is instead incorrect?

- What is, according to you, the easiest and what is the most difficult thing in the dance technique and repertoire?

Music:

- What is the role of music in this dance?
- How does music help you or hinder you when learning, training or performing?
- How do you feel the music in your body?
- If you had to choose only an instrument of the classical repertoire, which one would you choose and why?
- How do you listen to the music? On what aspects of the music do you focus more?

Imagery:

- How do you work through abhinaya pieces?
- Do you visualise something? And if so what?
- How do you portray emotions? From where do you take inspiration?
- Do you think you have to go through an emotion to portray it? How do you portray an emotion that is unfamiliar to you?

Performance:

- What is the ideal state of mind when you are learning and when you are performing? Can you describe the differences and similarities?
- What do you feel in your body when performing?
- How do you experience the presence of the audience? How does this affect your body experience and state of mind?

**3. Aesthetics:**

- Can you describe the ideal Odissi dancer? Which qualities she is expected to have?
- What do you think about male dancers? What are the challenges for them?
- What do you think about foreigners performing Odissi? What are the challenges, advantages and disadvantages?
- What do you look for when you are watching someone else's performance?
- What really makes a good performance? And what makes a bad performance?

**Conclusion:**

Is there anything else which you feel relevant to the topic we have discussed and you would like to add to our conversation?

## GLOSSARY

**Abhaṅga** asymmetrical stance in Odissi

**Abhimāna** pride

**Abhinaya** acting, pantomimic dance

**Ahaṅkāra** making of the self or self-consciousness

**Ānanda** spiritual bliss

**Aṅga** limb

**Arasa** pure dance phrase

**Ardhanārīśvara** the 'Lord who is half female', the representation of Lord Śiva and Goddess Pārvatī in a single body

**Āsana** posture

**Ati druta** very fast speed

**Āyurveda** traditional system of medical knowledge

**Batu** item of the traditional Odissi repertoire

**Beṅga pātiā** silver belt part of the canonical Odissi dance costume

**Bhakti** devotion

**Bharatanatyam** classical South Indian dance

**Bhāva** emotion

**Bhūmi praṇāṁ** bow to the earth

**Buddhi** intellect, discrimination

**Cakra** wheel, circle or energetic centre

**Cauka** square-like stance in Odissi

**Chapaka** in the Odissi technique a step in which the dancer stamps on a foot to displace the body towards the opposite direction

**Citta** mind

**Cittass' ekaggatā** one-pointedness of mind or unification of mind

**Darśan** vision, worshipping of the gods by literally seeing the idol

**Deśī** folk, popular, vulgar dance

**Devadāsīs** South Indian temple dancers

**Dharma** moral duty

**Dhrupad ālāp** one of the most ancient forms of Hindustani music

**Druta** fast speed

**Ekāgratā** one-pointed concentration

**Ektāla** common Odissi 4-beat rhythmic pattern with one clap on the first beat

**Gīta Govinda** medieval poem dedicated to Lord Krishna written by Jayadeva

**Gopīs** cowherd girls

**Gotipua** literally ‘one body’, traditional dance from Orissa performed by young boys

**Guru** master

**Gurukula** house of a guru

**Hasta Mudrā** hand gesture

**Jagannātha** presiding deity of Orissa and Odissi, a form of Lord Viṣṇu

**Jāti** division, caste, species

**Jayadeva** author of the poem Gīta Govinda

**Kalaripayattu** traditional South Indian martial art

**Kathak** classical North Indian dance

**Kośa** sheath of matter that surrounds the soul or consciousness

**Kṛṣṇa** one of the most worshipped Hindu deities, incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu

**Lajyā** shame, modesty, bashfulness

**Lāsya** gentle, delicate or feminine dance

**Lokadharmī** realistic representation in arts

**Madhya** medium speed

**Māhāris** women traditionally dedicated to religious service at the Jagannātha temple in Puri, Orissa

**Manas** mind, cognition

**Mārgi** classical, stylised or devotional dance

**Māyā** illusion, material reality

**Mokṣa** liberation from the cycle of rebirth

**Mūrti** religious idol

**Śiva Nāṭarāja** representation of Lord Śiva in dancing pose

**Nāṭya** dramatic art

**Naṭyādharmī** stylised representation

**Nāṭyaśāstra** ancient treatise on the performing arts, attributed to the Bharata Muni

**Nāyikā** heroine

**Nṛtta** pure dance

**Nṛtya** pantomimic dance

**Pakhāvaj** traditional double headed drum used in Odissi

**Pallavi** item of pure dance in the traditional Odissi repertoire

**Pān** chewing betel leaf

**Pārvatī** a form of the female divine in Hinduism

**Prakṛti** matter, nature

**Prāṇāyāma** extension of the breath

**Prapatti** self-surrendering

**Pūjā** worship

**Puruṣa** pure consciousness

**Puṣpāñjali** offering of flowers normally made to propitiate the deities

**Rādhā** Kṛṣṇa's beloved

**Rāga** melodic framework

**Rāgānugā bhakti sādhanā** religious practice established by the bhakti theologian Rūpa Gosvāmin

**Rasa** juice, taste, aesthetic pleasure

**Rāsālīlā** the cosmic play between Lord Kṛṣṇa and the milkmaids of Vrindavana

**Rasika** knowledgeable appreciator, art connoisseur

**Sāadhanā** way of life or practice having a spiritual connotation



**Sakhī** general term for a girl's female friend

**Śakti** power, vital energy

**Samabhaṅga** neutral standing pose in Odissi

**Samādhi** joining, a whole, combining, state of meditation

**Samskāra** self-refinement

**Samyama** concentration

**Sāṅkhya** traditional Indian philosophical system

**Sevā** service

**Siddhi** clarity of mind

**Śiva** one of the main Hindu deities

**Śloka** hymn, normally with an invocatory tone

**Śṛṅgāra** erotic sentiment

**Sthūla śarīra** gross body

**Sūkṣma śarīra** subtle body

**Svara** musical note

**Tahia** part of the head decorations in the canonical Odissi costume

**Tāla** rhythmic/metric system in Indian music

**Tāṇḍava** vigorous dance associated with Lord Śiva

**Tribhaṅga** three-bend stance in Odissi

**Ukuta, bols, bānī** onomatopoeic syllables used to verbalise the rhythmic patterns played by the drum

**Vaiṣṇava** worshipper of Lord Viṣṇu

**Vaiṣṇavism** worshipping of Lord Viṣṇu

**Vilambita** slow speed

**Viṣṇu** one of the main deity of Hinduism

**Yoga** Hindu spiritual philosophy and psychophysical discipline whose ultimate purpose is attaining unity between the individual self and the Supreme Being

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